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The content and implications of George MacDonald's theology with particular reference to his concept of 'the child'

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The content and implications of George
MacDonald's theology with particular reference to
his concept of 'the child'

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PhD thesis
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Abstract

George MacDonald (1824–1905) was writing at a time of Evangelical unease. Some, in the face of challenge, retreated behind the walls of traditional Evangelical dogma, while others accommodated their beliefs to a rapidly changing world. This ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ bifurcation of Evangelicalism provoked a response from MacDonald: he brings before us a child that offers a *via media*. Appearances are deceptive: it may look ‘Romantic’, but is rather a radical, sacramental icon undermining false doctrines of God and challenging the human response.

This is a necessarily broad study, not only to do justice to the complexity of the Victorian context, but because MacDonald’s theology—which Chesterton described as ‘jewels in an uneven setting’—is fragmented in an unsystematic opus of some fifty volumes of varying genre. An overview of MacDonald’s theology is constructed first; this is then used as the foundation for a close reading of his more opaque works before answering the question: What are the theological implications of MacDonald’s ‘child’?

This overview is presented in Chapter 5. To construct this, we consider (in Chapters 1–4) the wider context of MacDonald’s thought: his interlocutors, key influences, and social context. We consider, in some detail, the Victorian child: How did his contemporaries, religious and otherwise, view this enigma at the heart of society? What theology shaped those views? How did MacDonald challenge such received wisdom?

We then use our wider, and more specific, understanding of MacDonald’s theology as a foundation for a more nuanced reading of fantasy novels such as *Phantastes* and *Lilith* (Chapters 6–8): these, it is proposed, do not illustrate what he thinks; they *are* what he thinks, and are a rich theological source.

We close (Chapter 9) with a critical evaluation of MacDonald’s ‘theology of the child’, evaluating its contribution to theology today.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Ben Quash and Dr Michael Ledger-Lomas, for their invaluable guidance and support. I am grateful for the financial and moral support of family and friends—particularly my wife, Jeltje, my elderly parents whose support has been unwavering, Yvonne and Matt Carson, Andrew and Rebecca Whettam, and Dr Lisa Firth—and financial support from: the King’s College London Theological Trust, the Mylne Trust, the Catherine Mackichan Bursary Trust, the Sir Richard Stapley Educational Trust, and the Alexis Trust.

Abbreviations

Frequently cited works of George Macdonald:

AF	Alec Forbes of Howglen
HG	The Hope of the Gospel
NW	At the Back of the North Wind
US1	Unspoken Sermons, First Series
US2	Unspoken Sermons, Second Series
US3	Unspoken Sermons, Third Series

Additional abbreviations:

GMAW	George MacDonald and His Wife (Greville MacDonald).
GM	George MacDonald (William Raeper).
EE	Eccentric Existence (David Kelsey).

Note

Bible quotations are from the New King James Version unless stated otherwise. NKJV italics are omitted.

Emphasis in quotations is in the original unless stated otherwise.

Footnotes referring to 'page xx' (written in full) refer to page numbers in this thesis.

Chapter 1 The context of George MacDonald's work

1.1 Introduction

Like many Victorians, George MacDonald's (1824–1905) journey was one of emancipation from 'childhood' ways. His was a journey away from Calvinism in favour of a more benign vision of Christianity at the centre of which is the image of 'the child', an axiomatic image symbolising both the nature of God and the disposition of the faithful. One Presbyterian critic, George McCrie, lamented that he 'constantly harps about the [...] "childlike"', resulting in 'theological opinions, which are most unsound and dangerous'.¹ The central question we explore here is: What are the theological implications of MacDonald's understanding and use of this motif? We begin, however, with some comments regarding the validity of reading MacDonald's work—especially his novels—as theology.

To engage in theology is, in a fundamental sense, to become a worshipper. God cannot be the object of human investigation for this would require an impossible perspective 'outside' of being; rather, investigation into the nature of God can only be the result of a personal encounter with God, should God so permit—a permission, it would appear, granted only to those who are humble; to those who recognise their dependency on, and subordinacy to, God—the 'babes' of Matthew 11.25. In MacDonald's language, true theology is understood, practised, and expressed only by the child, one who embodies this attitude. To know the truth, then—as Pilate failed to realise—is to engage with the person of God. As such, three considerations are evident: first, that, since theology's 'object' is not only infinite but personal, it can never be fully known; second, that such knowledge is essentially 'storied' in that the truth regarding a person cannot be established by factual statements, however verifiable or logically correct; third, that truth is imprecise since subjectively perceived. George McCrie's conclusion that MacDonald's novels are 'most unsound and dangerous' is a tacit recognition that 'literature'—in its broadest sense as a medium of personal, imaginative (even childish) expression—*is* capable of making theological proposals (his fellow Presbyterian, Samuel Law Wilson, explicitly takes MacDonald to task for

¹ *The Religion of Our Literature* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875), p. 295.

his erroneous theology of conversion as expressed in a novel); however, the implication is that the imprecision of literature is unsuitable to express the ‘facts’ of theology; that literature is merely the frothy surface hiding a substrate of true—that is, logically verifiable—bedrock beliefs.

It may be argued that theology is essentially a second-order, objective reflection on such personal stories, notably the gospel narratives’ articulation of Christ, but, in light of the ‘personality’ of truth, literature may be viewed as not only a source of personal or imaginative fuel for subsequent reflection, but as itself a means of theological reflection and articulation. One thinks, for example, of Augustine’s *Confessions*, or Dostoevsky’s novels.² Speaking of Dante’s *Commedia*, for example (a poem that has significantly informed European theology), Vittorio Montemaggi proposes that truth is always the fruit of ‘human encounter’ (truth, in other words, is always in some sense embodied) and that—in recognition of this—literature such as Dante’s draws the reader into a ‘personal’ encounter with the author, others, and ultimately God, through his text. In Montemaggi’s words: ‘Dante’s text requires us to read it not only objectively but also by consciously situating our interpretation of it in the context of our subjective, first-person experience.’³ MacDonald is similarly driven by a conviction that theology involves more than the objective, academic analysis of presenting facts; rather, subjective engagement is required with the source of those facts, God. To this end, he writes imaginatively, demanding that interpretation is not dispassionate, but a conscious, subjective involvement with the text—and therefore with himself, as writer. This is most evident in *Lilith*, in which we are invited to ‘read’ MacDonald’s mind.

For Montemaggi, Dante’s poem is theology.⁴ This thesis, likewise, understands MacDonald’s work—notably his novels—as theology; as the articulation of the human encounter with God. Such encounters may be fictional, but, as Montemaggi notes regarding the prevalence of human characters in Dante’s fiction, ‘Human particularity and encounter destabilize easy distinctions between truth and fiction. A nonfictional story that fails to awaken us to the infinite

² See especially Williams, Rowan, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, & Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

³ Montemaggi, Vittorio, *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

value of human particularity can from this perspective be considered less true than a fictional one that succeeds.⁵ This tension between ‘real’ theology and that expressed in literature is a fundamental concern of MacDonald. Inasmuch as the former is the fruit of ‘adult’ endeavour—that is, of formal academic training in the discursive arts—it is suspect; only the more subjective and intuitive approach of the child, MacDonald asserts, is capable of expressing the ‘personality’ of truth. This thesis explores this claim. While certainly not a systematic or dogmatic theologian, it will be argued that MacDonald, whether in essays or novels, is making strong theological claims; not least, that he himself is such a child and therefore a medium of true theology. In this light, we will consider how his novels are not merely illustrative but *constitutive* of what he thinks; that even the most ‘frothy’ novels (fantasy works such as *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, for example) must be approached as theological works. We will also consider how MacDonald’s preference for imaginative story-telling represents a conscious methodological choice reflecting the view that theology has less to do with imparting factual information as awakening imaginative perception with a view to encouraging that personal encounter with the divine that is its essence. His pastoral goal in writing is the animation of childhood in us, for the Father can only embrace children. In what follows, it is assumed that since MacDonald is writing primarily as a theologian intent on leading his flock towards Christ,⁶ that the best way to read it is as theology, which, as Montemaggi suggests concerning the *Comedia*, is—

to be open to the claims it makes on our active participation in the journey of which it speaks. We might or might not agree with the propositional import of the particular way in which Dante conceptually and imaginatively articulates his theology in the *Commedia*. But if we are to read it *as* theology, and not simply engage in a detached analysis of its theological ideas, we need to allow ourselves, existentially, to interact with the text not simply as an object under examination, but as a living partner in a journey seeking to explore the deepest dimensions of our being, of the cosmos’ being, and of the point of encounter between the two.⁷

Having read natural philosophy (sciences) at the University of Aberdeen, MacDonald trained for the Congregational ministry at Highbury Theological College, London. Often por-

⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶ See page 120.

⁷ *Reading Dante's Commedia*, p. 33.

trayed as having been ousted from his first pastorate (in Arundel, Sussex) by a diaconate of duplicitous shopkeepers and tradesmen unsympathetic to his liberal ‘German’ theology, the truth may be more prosaic. His aspirations lay elsewhere: the loss of living was, it seems, to some extent self-engineered and little lamented. His theology, in any case, was never likely to appeal to a provincial Congregational congregation.⁸

By mid-century he was working primarily as a writer. Friends and acquaintances included Charles Dodgson (who tested *Alice* on the MacDonald children),⁹ Charles Kingsley,¹⁰ John Ruskin,¹¹ Lady Byron,¹² and Alexander John Scott, later principal of Owen’s College, Manchester.¹³ He became a critic of the world he had left behind, but unlike disenchanted Evangelicals of the era such as George Eliot, Francis W. Newman (brother of John Henry), or Edmund Gosse whose trajectory was away from faith,¹⁴ MacDonald remained ‘evangelical’. He published and lectured in a quest to promote Christianity in an era increasingly uncomfortable with traditional religion. His work might be summarised as a rejection of childishness (petulant, stubborn worship of a misconceived God) in favour of childhood (genuine submission and relationship to the Father).

While C. S. Lewis was of the opinion that MacDonald always had an enduring respect for his childhood religion,¹⁵ Chesterton dryly remarks that he said things ‘that were not in the least like the Calvinists’ and suggests his contribution to theology might be significant:

⁸ Greville MacDonald emphasises ‘constructive dismissal’ (*George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1924), pp. 177–87), however contemporaneous letters suggest MacDonald’s heart was elsewhere. From Highbury he writes, ‘I am not very happy myself [due to] wrong and painful thoughts’, and soon after accepting the pastorate confesses that his ‘greatest desire is [...] to go out itinerating’: ‘I mean to take another mode of helping men’ (*An Expression of Character: The Letters of George MacDonald*, ed. by Glenn Edward Sadler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 26, 50, 54).

⁹ *GMAW*, p. 342.

¹⁰ Kingsley’s *Water Babies* was a response to *Phantastes*. (Colin N. Manlove, ‘MacDonald and Kingsley: A Victorian Contrast’, in *The Gold Thread*, ed. by William Raeper (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp. 140–62 (p. 143).)

¹¹ ‘One of the closest friends of my father’ (*GMAW*, p. 192). MacDonald arranged clandestine meetings with Rose La Touche in his house, against the wishes of her parents (*ibid.*, ch. 11).

¹² Lady Byron praised MacDonald’s first poem *Within and Without*, subsequently financing family wintering in Algiers. (*Ibid.*, p. 265.)

¹³ ‘The man he revered beyond any met since leaving home’ (*ibid.*, p. 191).

¹⁴ David Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Lewis notes MacDonald’s repudiation of Calvinist doctrines yet suggests that he sees ‘elements of real and perhaps irreplaceable worth in the thing from which he is revolting’ (*George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), p. 12).

As Protestants speak of the morning stars of the Reformation, we may be allowed to note such names here and there as morning stars of the Reunion.

‘I fancy’, says Chesterton, ‘that he stands for a rather important turning-point in the history of Christendom.’¹⁶ His relative obscurity, however, and absence from current theological discourse is perhaps testimony to the opposite, however his ‘obscure’ ideas have found their way into popular culture, especially through *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁷ C. S. Lewis also credits him for leading him to faith, describing him as his ‘master’¹⁸—perhaps particularly so in his role as a fantasy author. I shall argue that, in some measure, Chesterton was right: that MacDonald was ‘a morning star of the Reunion’ by providing a *via media* between conservative and liberal Evangelicalism, and by helping those of faith to reconnect with pre-Reformation roots.

Recent work, such as Kerry Dearborn’s *Baptized Imagination*, gives an excellent overview of MacDonald’s theology. The aim here is to expand on this by exploring in greater detail MacDonald’s nineteenth century context, and to engage more critically with MacDonald’s theological conclusions. Dearborn, for example, suggests that MacDonald’s proviso for accepting ideas from eclectic sources was that they were ‘consistent with the Trinitarian faith’.¹⁹ However, universal salvation (including that of Judas and Satan) and a purgatorial hell, to give but two examples, are ideas which might indicate otherwise (if for ‘Trinitarian’ we read ‘Evangelical orthodoxy’). His theology is a syncretistic amalgam of ideas, happily exploring, for example, evolution and Eastern mysticism. Such leanings lead one scholar to remark that he has ‘a view of human experience *quite different* from that of much of historic Christianity’;²⁰ another, that his faith amounts to a ‘private religion’.²¹ These comments cannot, in my view, be justified. It seems, rather, that MacDonald’s work reflects (as one contemporary put it) ‘the noble protest of

¹⁶ *GMAW*, pp. 12–13.

¹⁷ There is a ring-wielding villain in *David Elginbrod*, the ring being inscribed in an undecipherable foreign tongue. In the short story, *The Castle*, there is a lost ring which ‘had for ages disappeared from the earth, but which had controlled the spirits, and the possession of which made a man simply what a man should be, the king of the world’ (*The Portent and Other Stories* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, [1890(?)]), pp. 175–76).

¹⁸ *Anthology*, p. 20; see also *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1956), pp. 179–181, 225, 226.

¹⁹ *Baptized Imagination* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 177.

²⁰ Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982; Eureka, CA: Sunrise, 1989), p. 53 (emphasis mine).

²¹ Richard H. Reis, *George MacDonald’s Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1972 [as *George MacDonald*]; Eureka CA: Sunrise, 1989), p. 32. Chesterton likewise writes: ‘He evolved out of his own mystical meditations a complete alternative theology leading to a completely contrary mood’ (*GMAW*, p. 12).

men like Maurice and Kingsley and [F. W.] Robertson, with whom the recovery of the central truth of Christianity, that God is love, came as almost a new gospel'.²² His views are—as we explore in this chapter—firmly embedded in contemporary thinking, and as he himself observes: 'No man could sing as he has sung, had not others sung before him.'²³ However, it is apparent that he has more in common with Emanuel Swedenborg (who imaginatively journeys into heaven and hell),²⁴ Jacob Boehme (whose mystical theology is produced despite the censure of church authorities, and whose humble station in life as a shoemaker probably appealed to MacDonald's Romantic leanings) or Gregory of Nyssa (with his focus on *epektasis*—the soul's progressive journey towards God) than any of the progenitors of the Westminster Confession.²⁵

While it is profitable to explore MacDonald from different perspectives, our focus here is firmly theological. Daniel Gabelman has a similar focus and I am indebted to him for his insight into MacDonald's fairytales, particularly the notion that 'levity'—understood as both 'lightness' and 'joyful unseriousness'—can only be experienced by those who renounce Enlightenment 'gravitas',²⁶ and that levity, in some sense, describes the playful nature of God, perhaps echoed here in my discussion of MacDonald's 'child'. Unlike Gabelman, I focus primarily on MacDonald's realist and fantasy works, exploring these in the light of the biblical sources quoted or implied, set within a broader historical study. I am indebted also to the many scholars quoted throughout this work, particularly to William Raeper—who started me on this journey—John Pennington, and Stephen Prickett.

Much of MacDonald's writing is a thought-experiment which tests the boundaries of the Evangelical orthodoxy of his day. It explores two related questions. What did Jesus mean when he challenged his followers to become 'as children'? How might this work out in practice?

Questions that must take account of the distortions, limitations, and power structures of a world

²² A. L. Moore, 'The Influence of Calvinism on Modern Unbelief', in *Religion in Victorian Britain, Vol. iii: Sources*, ed. by James R. Moore (Manchester: Open University, 1988), pp. 333–39 (p. 334).

²³ *England's Antiphon* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1868), p. 3.

²⁴ Note 52.

²⁵ The similarity between Boehme's cosmology and MacDonald's is discussed in Chapter 5, pages 134–135; resonances with Gregory are discussed in the final chapter, page 252. William Raeper singles out Swedenborg and Boehme as influences (*George MacDonald* (Tring: Lion, 1987), p. 240), and one suspects MacDonald had Boehme in mind when he cast a cobbler as the hero of *Salted With Fire*.

²⁶ See, for example, Gabelman, p. 71.

where the choice to be a ‘child’ appears misguided. MacDonald explores the nature and implications of that choice. This theological enquiry evaluates MacDonald’s answers to these questions and explores their implications and contribution to theology.

1.2 George MacDonald’s theology: key ideas and influences

The enduring, and ambiguous, influence of Scotland is evident. On the one hand, the liminal realm of *Faerie* exercised its magic power:

tales [...] of mountain, stream, and lake; of love and revenge; of beings less and more than natural—brownie and Boneless, kelpie and fairy; such wild legends also, haunting the dim emergent peaks of mist-swathed Celtic history.²⁷

This was a colourful world contrasting with the blacks worn to Sunday service. Scotland, for MacDonald, was a land of paradox with ‘the sweetest songs in its cottages, and the worst singing in its churches, of any country in the world’.²⁸

On the other hand, then, was an inflexible Calvinism, a counterpoint providing both foil and foundation for his thought, an inflexibility of which MacDonald’s immediate predecessors and mentors had fallen foul. In his childhood, for example, A. J. Scott’s and John McLeod Campbell’s licenses had been revoked (1831) by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for suggesting that Christ had died for all, not just the elect. One of Scott’s accusers, the leader of the Evangelical party, Andrew Thomson, considered Scott and his circle to have:

propagated doctrines which belie the word of God most odiously—which reason repudiates as inconsistent and mistaken—which break the constitution of the gospel into pieces, and substitutes for it freaks of fancy and unwholesome paradoxes—and which introduce into religion all that is silly and bigoted and presumptuous.²⁹

With such shadows hanging over him, it is unsurprising that the enduring respect for Calvinism that Lewis detected in MacDonald is not immediately apparent:³⁰ Calvinism is invariably, almost obsessively, disparaged leading one contemporary to complain: ‘His Calvinistic characters [...] are nearly all fanatics, cranks or oddities [yet they are presented as] the legiti-

²⁷ George MacDonald, *Malcolm*, 3 vols (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1875), III, p. 88.

²⁸ *David Elginbrod*, 3 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1863), III, p. 99.

²⁹ J. Philip Newell, ‘Unworthy of the Dignity of the Assembly: The Deposition of Alexander John Scott in 1831’, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 21 (1983), 249–62 (p. 250).

³⁰ *Anthology*, pp. 11–12.

mate products of Calvinism', whereas in truth they are representative of only 'two or three wizened, juiceless crabs from some out of the way lightning-smitten bough'.³¹ In MacDonald's mind, however, that 'lightning-smitten bough' equated to most established religion, leading an earlier critic to observe that 'his quarrel is therefore with all the Evangelical Churches at home and abroad'.³² That said, non-Evangelical religion does not escape: the 'fashionable sheep' of Anglicanism are mocked,³³ and there is an early critique of 'Pentecostal' emotionalism, observing that 'scream will call forth scream, as vibrant string from its neighbour will draw the answering tone'.³⁴

In MacDonald's view, hard Calvinism is the worst idolatry. First, it defames the character of God. Its God 'car[es] not for righteousness, but for his rights',³⁵ dramatized by Murdoch Malison, the 'Scotch schoolmaster of the rough old-fashioned type' in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*:

His pleasure was law, irrespective of right or wrong, and the reward of submission to law was immunity from punishment. He had his favourites in various degrees, whom he chose according to inexplicable directions of feeling ratified by "the freedom of his own will."³⁶ These found it easy to please him, while those with whom he was not primarily pleased, found it impossible to please him.³⁷

In contrast, MacDonald described God (as both Lewis and Chesterton put it) as 'easy to please but hard to satisfy'.³⁸ Conceiving of God as the ideal Victorian father he writes:

That no keeping but a perfect one will *satisfy* God, I hold with all my heart and strength; but that there is none else he cares for, is one of the lies of the enemy. What father is not pleased with the first tottering attempt of his little one to walk? What father would be satisfied with anything but the manly step of a full-grown son?³⁹

³¹ Samuel Law Wilson, *The Theology of Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), pp. 272–73.

³² *The Religion of Our Literature*, p. 305.

³³ *David Elginbrod*, III, pp. 178, 182.

³⁴ *Malcolm*, III, p. 59.

³⁵ *Unspoken Sermons: Third Series* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1889; Eureka, CA: Sunrise, 1996), p. 161.

³⁶ This phrase of John Locke (*Second Treatise of Civil Government*, VI. §63) concerns a child coming of age, now governed by 'reason' instead of trustees, and is probably a dig at Calvin's voluntarism (see 5.2 (d)).

³⁷ *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, 3 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1865), I, pp. 239–40.

³⁸ *Anthology*, p. 41; *GMAW*, p. 12.

³⁹ *Unspoken Sermons: Second Series* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1886; Eureka, CA: Sunrise, 1989), pp. 10–11.

Robin Stockitt notes that such negative views of God result from the dominance of a juridical model in Western theology leading to a theological grammar of lord and servant or master and slave. He concludes:

The outcome of this starting point has been to place ethics at the heart of what it means to be human with the originating reference point being legal decree rather than the divine creative Word.⁴⁰

The disjunction between ‘creative Word’ and ‘legal decree’ is at the heart of the matter. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen identifies ‘the biblically, historically, dogmatically and ecumenically unfounded and counter-productive tendency in some conservative Protestant traditions to make the forensic framework not only the dominant one but also the exclusive one’ while neglecting the many other New Testament soteriological metaphors.⁴¹ This concern was shared by Maurice⁴² and likewise MacDonald: in response he, like Coleridge before him, placed ‘the creative Word’ (that is, Christ) at the heart of his theology and of his understanding of the *imago Dei*.

MacDonald’s second concern was the reduction of faith (a relational and obedient response to God) to belief (merely intellectual assent to ‘correct’ dogma).⁴³ It is evident that negative childhood experiences led to sympathy with popular polemics against the ‘miserable, puritanical, martinet’ God,⁴⁴ such as Herbert Spencer’s 1884 broadside:

The visiting on Adam’s descendants, through hundreds of generations, dreadful penalties for a small transgression which they did not commit; the damning of all men who do not avail themselves of an alleged mode of obtaining forgiveness, which most men have never heard of; and the effecting a reconciliation by sacrifice of one who was perfectly innocent are modes of action which, ascribed to a human ruler, would call forth expressions of abhorrence; and the ascription of them to the Ultimate Cause of things, even now felt to be full of difficulties, must become impossible.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Robin Stockitt, *Imagination and the Playfulness of God* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2011), p. 138.

⁴¹ *Justification: Five Views*, ed. by James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (London: SPCK, 2012), p. 124. Walter Schmithals identifies ten NT soteriological metaphors (*Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), I, pp. 437–479); see also John McIntyre, *Faith, Theology, and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1987), pp. 60–61.

⁴² *The Kingdom of Christ*, 2nd edn (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1843), p. 97 (2. 2. 3).

⁴³ See Alister E. McGrath, *Heresy* (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 22.

⁴⁴ *US3*, p. 161.

⁴⁵ ‘Religious Retrospect and Prospect’, *Popular Science Monthly*, 24 (1884), 340–51 (p. 345).

Such issues provoked a theological response (in this particular case, a sermon)⁴⁶ with a strong leaning towards theodicy.

As Brian Cummings notes, having started with the goal of justifying humanity to God, by the time Milton was writing *Paradise Lost* the Reformation had come full circle with Milton finding it necessary to ‘assert Eternal Providence, | And justifie the wayes of God to men’.⁴⁷ MacDonald felt himself to be in the same position. Foremost was the paradox of an omnipotent God of love and grace who, apparently, was content to eternally damn the majority of the creatures made in God’s image—being either unwilling or unable to save them—as articulated by the false gospel of Calvinism, ‘founded on the pagan notion that suffering is an offset for sin’;⁴⁸ a religion that ‘would have us love Christ for protecting us from God, instead of for leading us to God’.⁴⁹

MacDonald found resolution by aligning himself with a more imaginative Romantic approach to theology. In contrast to a ‘profoundly anti-intellectual and anti-aesthetic’ Evangelicalism,⁵⁰ he found solace, for example, in Swedenborg. A letter to his father expresses a measure of emancipation and reflects a Coleridgean view of faith as organic, rather than static:⁵¹

I grow younger and happier. I see an outlet now from miseries of the mind, unknown to any which form portions of my earliest recollections, and have grown with my growth—but which by & by I shall quite outgrow. Swedenborg says that the angels are always growing younger. In this saying, which is *logically* absurd, there is a very deep meaning. Oh I know a little now [...] what Christ’s deep sayings mean about becoming like a child.⁵²

This early discovery of ‘childlikeness’ underlines the influence of ‘German’ (European) mysticism. Prior to this, while in the north of Scotland, there is evidence from his fiction that he read mystics such as Novalis and poets such as Goethe.⁵³ Whenever and however discovered, the issue is that he found an alternative, imaginative approach to faith. This letter, written short-

⁴⁶ ‘The Truth in Jesus’, *US2*, pp. 233–64.

⁴⁷ *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 421.

⁴⁸ *The Hope of the Gospel* (London: Ward, Lock, Bowden & Co., 1892; Eureka, CA: Sunrise, 1989), p. 81.

⁴⁹ *Donal Grant* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1883; Eureka, CA: Sunrise, 1990), p. 28.

⁵⁰ Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 253.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵² *Letters GM*, pp. 58–59.

⁵³ *The Portent* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1864), p. 83.

ly before his departure from Arundel, is indicative of this epiphany, and his unease at Highbury was no doubt down to excessive dogmatism quenching such mystical leanings.⁵⁴ The influence of English Romantics—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Browning and Shelley (and a Romantic reverence for Shakespeare)⁵⁵—cemented this very imaginative approach to epistemology. It represents a strong alignment to Romanticism and a suspicion of Enlightenment rationalism.

1.2 (a) The influence of Romanticism

Imagination and childhood preoccupied the Romantics, and in Coleridge—‘one of the first British theologians to assert that all of creation shared in the gift of life given by God’⁵⁶—

MacDonald found the foundation for his theology of imagination. Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* begins with lines from *Paradise Lost* affirming human being as the pinnacle of God’s created order:

To intellectual!—give both life and sense,
Fancy and understanding; whence the soul
REASON receives, and reason is her being,
Discursive or intuitive.⁵⁷

MacDonald took on board Coleridge’s understanding of ‘reason’ (cognition) as being both ‘discursive *and* intuitive’ and echoed his famous division of imagination into primary imagination, secondary imagination, and fancy, the former being ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’⁵⁸ and therefore the spark of the divine presence in the human mind. On this basis, MacDonald insists that imagination is the prime cognitive faculty that *leads* ‘reason’:

the imagination labours to extend [the intellect’s] territories, to give it room. She sweeps across the borders, searching out new lands into which she may guide her plodding brother. The imagination is the light which redeems from the darkness for the eyes of the understanding.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Discussed further, pages 23–25.

⁵⁵ Especially evident in Coleridge, see, for example, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by James Engels and W. Jackson Bate (Routledge and Kegan Paul, Princeton University Press, 1983), II, p. 19. With the exception of Coleridge, papers on all these writers appear in MacDonald’s *A Dish of Orts*.

⁵⁶ *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, p. 33.

⁵⁷ Coleridge, *Collected Works*, I, p. 295.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 304–5.

⁵⁹ *A Dish of Orts* (London: Sampson Low Marston, 1895), p. 14.

Crucially, however, after Coleridge, the ‘light’ referred to in this last sentence is divine. Human imagination is not simply *like* God’s but ‘a repetition in the finite mind’—it *is* God’s direct presence in human consciousness:

But God sits in that chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness, and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is His candle. Our hope lies in no most perfect mechanism even of the spirit, but in the wisdom wherein we live and move and have our being.⁶⁰

Human imagination is the divine gift uniting the poles of being—God in nature and God in consciousness. The imagination leads in ‘finding out the works of God’; the ‘intellect’ must follow:

What we mean to insist upon is, that in finding out the works of God, the Intellect must labour, workman-like, under the direction of the architect, Imagination.⁶¹

The distinction between imagination and fancy is evident. In Coleridge, fancy is ‘emancipated from the order of time and space’, however this does not imply a similarly transcendent dimension: it deals with ‘fixities and definites’ and ‘must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association’.⁶² That is, fancy transcends spatio-temporal constraints but is nevertheless earth-bound, a human capacity. Robin Stockitt summarises thus: ‘The exercise of choice that is open to Fancy is deliberate and intentional but the raw materials available to it are limited to what the human mind can remember or has experienced.’⁶³ MacDonald reflects this in his advice to those who would foster imagination in the young. The good teacher should—

point out to him [the pupil] the essential difference between reverie and thought; between dreaming and imagining. He will teach him not to mistake fancy, either in himself or in others, for imagination, and to beware of hunting after resemblances that carry with them no interpretation.⁶⁴

As Cardinal Newman remarked, it was through such philosophical engagement that Coleridge, a ‘very original thinker’, had ‘made trial of his age, and succeeded in interesting its genius in the cause of Catholic truth’,⁶⁵ praise centred on the recognition that, unlike Kant’s reverse

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶² Coleridge, *Collected Works*, I, p. 305.

⁶³ *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, pp. 66–67.

⁶⁴ Orts, p. 41.

⁶⁵ John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co, 1908), p. 97.

Copernican revolution in philosophy, Coleridge's quest was to centre meaning back on God. Newman, however, qualified his accolade by observing that Coleridge 'indulged in a liberty of speculation, which no Christian can tolerate', a comment to be borne in mind here as we evaluate MacDonald's ideas, particularly as those more sceptical of Coleridge, such as F. J. A. Hort, described the latter—in an age with a predilection for taxonomy—as:

that which refuses to be classified. An author whose opinions will not range with those of any recognised party, or whose works never seem quite rightly lodged in any one division of a well-regulated library, occupies in general estimation what was once the place of a zoophyte or platypus,—an uncanny creature, possibly of demoniacal origin. Such a divine monster was Coleridge.⁶⁶

Is MacDonald also 'an uncanny creature, possibly of demoniacal origin'?

F. D. Maurice, like Newman, mediated Coleridgean ideas to the Victorian church. His influence, however, was not confined to Anglicanism: through men like R. W. Dale, James Baldwin Brown, and MacDonald, his influence on nonconformity (especially Congregationalism) was considerable.⁶⁷ 'In fact,' writes F. J. Powicke in the 1870s about his student days at Spring Hill College, 'a Maurician cult grew up, and probably did more to shape our theology than the lectures of the principal, Dr. [David Worthington] Simon'.⁶⁸ 'Maurice's influence on MacDonald', says William Raeper, 'cannot be stressed too strongly'.⁶⁹

Through the mouth of the hero in *David Elginbrod*, MacDonald paid tribute:⁷⁰

I seldom go to church [...] but when I do, I come here; and always feel that I am in the presence of one of the holy servants of God's great temple not made with hands. I heartily trust that man. He is what he seems to be.⁷¹

Maurice singled out his debt to Coleridge, writing, for example, that *Aids to Reflection*—a book that particularly appeals to 'childlike men and women'— 'is [a book] to which I feel

⁶⁶ 'Coleridge', *Cambridge Essays* (1856) in *Romanticism and Religion*, p. 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, especially chapters 5, 6 and 8.

⁶⁸ Mark D. Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850–1918* (New York and London: Garland, 1987), p. 142.

⁶⁹ *GM*, p. 240.

⁷⁰ 'Many people assumed [this] was meant to represent F. D. Maurice' (Barbara Amell, 'On MacDonald and Maurice', *Wingfold*, 91 (2015), 25–33 (p. 26)).

⁷¹ *David Elginbrod*, III, p. 196. MacDonald named one of his sons 'Frederick', asking his namesake to be godfather ('On MacDonald and Maurice', p. 27).

myself under [...] deep and solemn obligations',⁷² and that with regard to the history of the Bible, he had 'said very little indeed of which [Coleridge's] thought was not the germ', confessing to have stolen 'many other thoughts'.⁷³ Geoffrey Rowell identifies three in particular: 'that eternity was independent of duration; that the power of repentance is not limited to this life; and that it is not revealed whether or not all will ultimately be saved'.⁷⁴ As well as his father's Unitarianism, Rowell notes the impact of the 'teaching of the Scottish divines, Erskine of Linlathen and McLeod Campbell; the Cambridge Platonists; the mystical tradition of Jacob Boehme and William Law; all these left their mark on Maurice's theology'⁷⁵—and MacDonald's, through whom they were mediated to a wider audience.

Jeremy Morris notes a focus on the *imago Dei*. Maurice particularly objected to Pusey's idea that at Baptism the candidate received a new *nature*, the implication being that the old nature was at best suspect, at worst evil—in other words, a doctrine that undermined the goodness and 'grace' of creation and the universality of the impact of the Incarnation.⁷⁶ Maurice stressed that the Articles of the Church of England—

did not begin, as was the case with Calvinism, from a conviction of human sinfulness which then became the basis for a theological system, but from a restatement of the 'Catholic foundation' of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the being of God, the Scriptures, and the Creeds.⁷⁷

Other themes we find in Maurice include a focus on the kingdom of God in contrast to human self-focus, 'each in reference to a separate centre', that is the essence of sin:

And it is the Kingdom of God because men are brought into it that they may see themselves, their fellow creatures, the whole universe, as He sees them; not partially, or each in reference to a separate centre, as they naturally do.⁷⁸

The fatherhood of God is also contrasted with 'schemes for our deliverance':

⁷² *The Kingdom of Christ*, pp. 11, 10.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷⁴ *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 83.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷⁶ *F. D. Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 63.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷⁸ Maurice, *Religions of the World*, in *ibid.*, p. 154.

We have theories of sin, of justification, of apostolical succession, schemes of divinity Protestant, Romish, semi-Romish, Anglican, Dissenting. But where is God in them all? Not first at least, not a Father; but merely the provider of a certain scheme for our deliverance.⁷⁹

On this view, faith is not to be found in ‘correct’ dogma (Maurice was particularly suspicious of doctrines that distinguished between ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ belief—notably Evangelicalism and Tractarianism) but instead focused on ‘complete fidelity to God’s will’⁸⁰—obedience. Stephen Prickett identifies a corresponding preference for ‘aesthetic rather than discursive forms of apprehension’, and that this ‘poetic’ methodology necessarily led to a distrust of systems. Instead, truth must be perceived organically, the latter concept not only emphasising the need for holistic vision able to discern ‘organic’, symbolic truth, but drawing attention to the subjective, fluid, and developmental nature of revelation.⁸¹ All these ideas are evident in MacDonald.

MacDonald, then, is part of a Romantic tradition tracing its heritage back through the Lakes poets to European writers such as Schelling, Goethe, Kant, and Rousseau. In addition, we find the likes of Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg), Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Schiller, and Friedrich Schleiermacher providing chapter epigrams for MacDonald’s first published novel, *Phantastes*. Add to this the influence of Jacob Boehme, Dante, and Emanuel Swedenborg and a picture emerges of a mystical and imaginative approach to faith privileging ‘feelings’—understood not as the means to discern religious truth, but as the *result* of viewing truth from a holistic and imaginative perspective.⁸² Wordsworth’s mediation in this respect is clear. We simply note at this point that—commenting on ‘Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’—MacDonald praises the poet’s ability to express how the imagination unites the poles of being: ‘the result of the conjunction of the mind of man, and the mind of God manifested in His works; spirit coming to know the speech of spirit’.⁸³

The term ‘imagination’ in this essay will be used (until further clarified) in this Romantic sense (as I believe MacDonald understood it) to refer to the high level cognitive ability to intuit-

⁷⁹ Maurice, *Life*, in *ibid.*, p. 150.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 61.

⁸¹ *Romanticism and Religion*, pp. 124–27.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁸³ *Orts*, p. 250.

tively discern the meaning of symbols; a bridge uniting the ‘poles of being’, that is, a divine gift providing the means to discern the presence of God in the soul and in nature—the bridge to transcendence.

1.3 The Victorian backdrop: a divided Evangelical world

Such views placed MacDonald on a collision course with a conservative Evangelicalism that, following Calvin, saw human imagination as essentially corrupt. We find Samuel Law Wilson, for example, complaining that MacDonald’s Romantic leanings lead to ‘theological perversities’ and a ‘sentimental piety’ considered superior to ‘ordinary Evangelical religion’; that he reduces conversion to a ‘slight and facile process’, ignoring ‘the awful controversy caused by sin’ and the need for redeeming grace. Furthermore, ‘natural influences in the process of man’s salvation’ are given undue prominence, marginalising the Spirit of God.⁸⁴

While critical of MacDonald’s artistic misrepresentation, Wilson’s real target is unsound theology. He has no time for a partnership between nature and the inward working of the Spirit that negates the need for an infallible Bible interpreted by an ‘official’ church. For example, the conversion (or at least the reformation) of two alcoholics in *Alec Forbes*—accomplished by the working of ‘one good and strong spirit—essential life and humanity [, the] spirit was love’⁸⁵—is for Wilson a travesty:

Thus “the spirit of essential life and humanity” it will be observed, is all the spirit that is needed to effect the saving change in this brace of sinners, and there is more virtue in “love” to redeem and reform than in all the moral appliances of Evangelical religion.⁸⁶

Wilson is unable to concede that ‘love’ is more effective in saving souls from eternal damnation than ‘the moral appliances of Evangelical religion’, but behind this lies the more fundamental issue of the liberal challenge to Evangelical conservatism against a backdrop of social ferment.

⁸⁴ *The Theology of Modern Literature*, p. 284. Wilson, an Irish Presbyterian professor at Assembly’s College Belfast, was particularly ‘concerned about the impact of insights derived from higher criticism upon ordinary believers’ (Andrew R. Holmes, ‘Biblical Authority and the Impact of Higher Criticism in Irish Presbyterianism, ca. 1850-1930’, *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, 75 (2006), 343–73, p. 358 footnote).

⁸⁵ *AF*, III, p. 129.

⁸⁶ *The Theology of Modern Literature*, p. 286.

The latter third of the nineteenth century, when MacDonald produced most of his work, was perhaps that century's most volatile period. In the first half of the century, unchecked capitalism, the Irish famine, Asiatic cholera, urbanisation and industrialisation (to highlight merely some of the social challenges) had produced a highly unbalanced society with endemic deprivation. Revolution was in the air.⁸⁷ Conditions, especially in the industrial north where thirteen-year-old children worked seventy-two hours a week and died at the age of fifteen,⁸⁸ provoked Marx to write *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (first published in 1845 in German) and Engels *The Condition of England* (1844). Ruskin complained that treating humans this way was to—

smother their souls within them, [...] to make the flesh and skin [...] into leathern thongs to yoke machinery with. [...] England's] multitudes [are] sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke, and the strength of them is given daily to be wasted.⁸⁹

R. W. Dale, 'probably one of the most influential Nonconformist theologians of the nineteenth century',⁹⁰ paints a picture of a fast-changing world full of both danger and promise, but emphasises the former:

We are living in a new world ... Immense development of the manufacturing industries, the wider separation of the classes in the great towns—a separation produced by the increase of commercial wealth—the new relations which have grown up between the employers and the employed, the great spread of popular education, the growth of a vast popular literature, the increased political power of the masses of the people, the gradual decay of the old aristocratic organization of society, and the advance, in many forms, of the spirit of democracy—have urgently demanded fresh applications.⁹¹

By mid-century, social awareness—'the spirit of democracy'—was growing. Evangelicals sensed a new dawn: that mere toleration might finally give way to social equality, that the Church might finally be disestablished, and that Christ would begin to establish his kingdom among the 'dark satanic mills'. Dale's call for 'fresh applications' from the religious community was salutary. It is as if the Ruskinian image of the poor being used as factory-fodder is stirring

⁸⁷ Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, Dangerous People?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 334.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 574, 589.

⁸⁹ *The Stones of Venice*, 4th edn (Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1886), 6. 13.

⁹⁰ *Dissolution of Dissent*, p. 4.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

the religious conscience—revealing the paucity of the theological platitudes supporting social oppression—in a way that pre-industrial-revolution exploitation of the poor could not, masked as it was by scenes (if only imaginary) of pastoral contentment. It is the driving force behind Carlyle’s polemics about ‘the condition of England’: work in factories, in his view, was not equivalent to honest artisan work, but merely slavery. He, like Dale, demanded a religious response from the ‘ancient guides of Nations, Prophets, Priests’ that had lost contact with reality, mocking their apostasy and delusion:

Ye have forgotten God, ye have quitted the ways of God, or ye would not have been unhappy. It is not according to the laws of Fact that ye have lived and guided yourselves, but according to the laws of Delusion, Imposture, and wilful and unwillful *Mistake* of Fact; behold therefore the Unveracity is worn out; Nature’s longsuffering with you is exhausted; and ye are here!⁹²

We must not allow Carlyle’s typically Jeremianic invective to detract from its perspicacity: theological shift was needed. It came in the form of a transition from the ‘age of atonement’—‘a time when the dominant mode of thought [was] an amalgam of enlightenment rationalism and Evangelical eschatology, and its core or “hinge” was the Christian doctrine of the Atonement’⁹³—to the ‘age of incarnation’. The preoccupation with personal salvation became increasingly a *social* quest to wake humanity to the knowledge that the race was *already* part of the family of God under the headship of the incarnate Christ; and since it was optimistically assumed that evolution was moral as well as biological, hopes rose for a golden future under King Jesus. There was a corresponding rise in postmillennialism⁹⁴ and an increasing Maurician emphasis on the social implications of Christ’s ‘spiritual society’.⁹⁵

This shift had a direct impact socially, particularly on the relationship between nonconformity and the State.⁹⁶ The theological emphasis on the incarnation—one aspect of which was that Christ’s intervention in human history had *already* united all under the headship of Christ—fuelled the nonconformist quest for equality. It led to a stronger emphasis on sanctification (ho-

⁹² Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), p. 24. See also, John Morrow, *Thomas Carlyle* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), pp. 75–103.

⁹³ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 3.

⁹⁴ The belief in a millennial golden age before the second advent. David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), pp. 130–32.

⁹⁵ *The Kingdom of Christ*, p. 206.

⁹⁶ A significant theme in *Dissolution of Dissent*.

ly living in community) rather than simply justification (the personal ‘insurance policy’).⁹⁷

Those such as Edward Miall were convinced that the disestablishment of the Church of England was imminent. This, combined with increasing nonconformist wealth and education, led to a corresponding increase in political engagement driven by a theology emphasising the Christian’s duty to engage with this life rather than simply focus on the afterlife, facilitated by the weakening of the Anglican establishment.

However, when MacDonald was writing, these long-term implications were only incipient. Despite strides made to address social deprivation, the ‘brotherhood of man’ theology had yet to systematically impact social ills,⁹⁸ partly due to an almost hallucinatory belief in human goodness and a corresponding naivety, perhaps blindness, relating to the true state of society, in part because that society was considered ordained by God. This goes some way to account for the unconvincing social settings and characters that populate MacDonald’s fiction. If one adds to this the general problem of Romanticism’s ambiguity in relation to evil,⁹⁹ then we have perhaps uncovered some of the root issues which need to be explored in relation to MacDonald’s thought.

In mid-century there was also fierce debate centred around three issues: the doctrine of future punishment for the wicked (as opposed to ‘the larger hope’ that all might be saved), the infallibility and inspiration of the Bible (and whether ‘higher criticism’ was acceptable), and the implications of scientific advances. Such issues divided Evangelicals. Increasing unease about the moral implications of conservative theology led to the prevalence of more liberal ideas, and the need for faith to bend with cultural change gained more traction. The central moral dilemma concerned the nature of God: was God really like Murdoch Malison, the sadistic schoolmaster?¹⁰⁰ Darwin suggested ‘yes’. Unlike Goethe’s Romantic vision of nature as God’s numinous robe favoured by Carlyle and MacDonald, Tennyson’s nature ‘red in tooth and claw’, Darwin pondered, must have been invented by a demon: ‘What a book a Devil’s Chaplain might write

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 22–23.

⁹⁸ Hilton suggests that there was no public or political consensus on civic culture until after mid-century. (*A Mad, Bad, Dangerous People?*, p. 311.)

⁹⁹ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters, Volume III* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ Note 37.

on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature.’¹⁰¹ Doubt was in the air about both ‘Nature’ and God, leading Tennyson to ask:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life [...]?¹⁰²

MacDonald was ‘liberal’ in that he chose to engage with such questions. Liberals saw conservatives as stubborn and petulant children refusing to modify their views in the light of increasing revelation. Conservatives, for their part, considered such ‘revelation’ as fundamentally flawed and accused liberals of rebellion against the hard-won truths of their forebears. Judgements against liberals from conservatives such as Wilson and McCrie who accuse MacDonald of inventing a new religion (like the recent conclusion of John Piper and Timothy Keller that MacDonald was ‘not a Christian’)¹⁰³ were not uncommon. Charles Haddon Spurgeon typified the reaction to liberalism when he remarked in 1877 that ‘a new religion has been initiated which is no more Christianity than chalk is cheese’,¹⁰⁴ and accused liberals of ‘toying with the deadly cobra of “another gospel” in the form of “modern thought”’.¹⁰⁵

MacDonald’s migration towards liberalism was not untypical. William Hale White, for example, a fellow Congregationalist who had studied at Highbury College’s reincarnation as New College, found himself unable to accept the inflexible dogmatism on offer and was expelled for questioning whether the Bible should be read as one book (becoming a civil servant).¹⁰⁶ He writes:

¹⁰¹ *The Dissenters*, p. 19.

¹⁰² *In Memoriam*, LV.

¹⁰³ Note 544.

¹⁰⁴ *The Dissenters*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁵ *Nonconformist and Independent*, 15 Sep 1893 in *Dissolution of Dissent*, p. 205.

¹⁰⁶ *The Dissenters*, pp. 3–4; Dale A. Johnson, *The Changing Shape of English Nonconformity, 1825–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 65.

The theological and biblical teaching was a sham [...]. So it came to pass that about the Bible [...] we were in darkness. It was a magazine of texts, and those portions of it which contributed nothing in the shape of texts, or formed no part of the [Calvinistic] scheme, were neglected.¹⁰⁷

Thomas Toke Lynch (whose Romantic poetry was perceived as a threat to orthodoxy) left active ministry to become a writer, and within nonconformity generally numerous voices questioned traditional claims. Many column inches were devoted to religious debates, becoming front page in the 1870s and 1880s when events surrounding the Congregational Leicester Conference (1877) became public knowledge, and when Spurgeon went into print to complain about the ‘down grade’—the liberalisation—of his own Baptist denomination leading to acrimonious exchanges with liberal colleagues such as John Clifford culminating in his secession from the Baptist Union in 1887.¹⁰⁸

The general picture in the third quarter of the nineteenth century is one of increasing impatience with inflexible conservative Evangelical doctrines¹⁰⁹ and a consequent migration towards liberalism or secularism. The flow was not, though, in one direction: many continued to find refuge in the ‘old truths’. The result was fragmentation more than migration, and (reminiscent of the situation during the interregnum of the seventeenth century when censorship ceased to function) it was felt that the abandonment of ‘first principles’ was precipitating a rise in ‘the vain speculations of romancing rationalists’.¹¹⁰

1.3 (a) Conservatism and liberalism

MacDonald and his mid-century contemporaries faced a dilemma. Enlightenment thinking had fostered a more rational approach to Christianity which tended to equate truth with verifiable facts and was suspicious of the unverifiable. The architects of the Reformation had constructed a Christian edifice built on the ‘factual’ foundation of a divinely-inspired inerrant text and a his-

¹⁰⁷ *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (London: Trübner and Co., 1889), pp. 12, 14. Mark Johnson observes that ‘Colleges like Highbury, which had generated Revival preachers, tended to be theologically narrow and intellectually secluded’ (*Dissolution of Dissent*, p. 67).

¹⁰⁸ Mark Hopkins, *Nonconformity’s Romantic Generation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), pp. 193–248.

¹⁰⁹ I am using the term ‘conservative’ primarily in this inflexible sense to mean those fundamentally opposed to revising received views, noting that other conservative views were being sharpened by the debates of the day.

¹¹⁰ Christopher Hill notes regarding the seventeenth century situation: ‘To the argument that individual interpretations of the Scriptures and congregational autonomy would lead to religious anarchy, radicals retorted that the inner light is one, and can be recognised by the children of light. *Areopagitica* [Milton] assumes that, given freedom of debate, all men’s reason must naturally lead them, sooner or later, to recognise the same truths’ (*The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), p. 81). The situation then, and in the nineteenth century, proved Milton and the radicals to be mistaken.

torical Jesus who worked miracles to prove his authenticity. As the Methodist theologian Marshall Randles noted, for example, in his *First Principles of Faith* (1884), ‘theism is essentially founded in reason’. As Dale Johnson notes, he ‘built his entire case on the argument from causality’.¹¹¹ The dilemma was that the same principles that had given rise to a new, more vibrant, more ‘reasonable’ expression of Christianity—the fruit in part of the emphasis on the logical and therefore investigable nature of God’s creation—led to erosion of those ‘factual’ foundations, and cracks were appearing in the superstructure.¹¹² Although Evangelicalism did not, and does not, equate to Calvinism (as Evangelicalism was also forged in the fire of the Great Awakening with its mystical overtones and Arminian theology), Calvinist thinking was deeply embedded in the resulting system—especially so in MacDonald’s Scotland—a system vulnerable, as it were, to self harm on two counts: not only was its internal logic corrosive to its foundational beliefs, the focus on the defence of ‘correct’ beliefs led to increasing fragmentation. As Jacob Boehme’s biographer had expressed it (with some perspicacity):

LEARNED REASON’S Influence and Operations in the Sanctuary [has] split all Christendom into numberless Parties; each as sure of it’s [*sic*] own Rectitude, and of it’s Neighbour’s Deficiency.¹¹³

As Iain McGilchrist observes, if one adds to this Reformed iconoclasm, anti-aestheticism, and distrust of imagination:

What is so compelling here is that the motive force behind the Reformation was the urge to regain authenticity, with which one can only be profoundly sympathetic. The path it soon took was that of the destruction of all means whereby authenticity could have been recaptured.¹¹⁴

It is unsurprising, therefore, that MacDonald expressed unease and was depressed by his experience at Highbury since such nonconformist colleges set out to produce effective preachers of fixed dogma, not critical thinkers. The colleges were “‘factories for preachers and pastors,” in the phrase of the Presbyterian W. G. Elmslie, as opposed to shrines of culture or centers of

¹¹¹ *English Nonconformity*, p. 130.

¹¹² Jonathan Sacks argues that the structural weakness in Christianity caused by the contamination of ‘Jerusalem’ with the logic of ‘Athens’ goes back to the Apostle Paul. (*The Great Partnership* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), pp. 62–66.)

¹¹³ Francis Okely, *Memoirs of the Life, Death, Burial, and Wonderful Writings, of Jacob Behmen* (Northampton: printed by Tho. Dicey for the translator, and for J. Lackington (no. 46) Chiswell-Street, Moorfields, London. Sold also at Bristol by T. Mills, and at Leeds by J. Binns, 1780), p. ii.

¹¹⁴ *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 316.

scholarship and erudition’;¹¹⁵ they championed the principles of dissent but did not allow people to be dissenters.¹¹⁶

MacDonald recognises the paradoxes in the religion of his day. He summarily dismisses views he considers based on falsehood while holding in tension conflicting conservative and liberal claims, refusing to be drawn towards over-dogmatic conclusions. His Maurician ability to live with paradox reflects his mentor’s view that truth is larger than specifics and is ‘organic’ in the sense discussed above.¹¹⁷ Although notionally wedded to Reformed factual foundations such as a miracle-working Jesus, his general approach to the received wisdom from tradition and sacred text is that both may be questioned and must be interpreted imaginatively.

1.3 (b) The nature of MacDonald’s response

Both conservative and liberal Evangelicals viewed the cosmos as created by God and that there existed beyond it a supernatural realm. The key difference concerned the view of that cosmos and the sacred text. The supernatural theism of conservatives regarded creation as entirely separate from God and essentially corrupt having been irrevocably damaged by the Fall. The cosmos, like ‘un-elect’ humanity, was destined for the fire; it would be recreated, rebellious humanity would not. The sacramental doorway to the more ‘real’ transcendent realm was the Bible—the inerrant interpreter of history and human experience; it was the unchanging reference point in a world of flux.

Conversely, liberal incarnational theology focused on God’s immanence leading to a sacramental view of observed reality; a Romantic optimism that nature, despite its flaws, revealed God. The Bible was a product of human history; history should be used to interpret the Bible, not the other way round. The view, however, of both Bible and cosmos was that both were sacramental despite the damage caused by human sin, both were inspired by God; inerrancy in scripture and perfection in creation were not prerequisites for sacrality.

¹¹⁵ *English Nonconformity*, p. 63. The view was: ‘What was Evangelical was old; what was new was not Evangelical’ (ibid., p. 65).

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

¹¹⁷ *Romanticism and Religion*, pp. 126–27.

The view of the Bible as inerrant and the oft-repeated cry ‘THE BIBLE, AND THE BIBLE ALONE, IS THE RELIGION OF DISSENTERS’¹¹⁸ reflected a longing for epistemic certainty in a changing world, but, as P. T. Forsyth was to observe at the end of the century, this was a certainty that came with a high price tag:

“The whole Bible or none,” it was said. “Take but a stone away and the edifice subsides.” This came of the Bible having been reduced to a fabric instead of an organism. And how many sceptics that course has made! [...] If I were a Secularist I would not touch by assault the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration and inerrancy. I should let it work freely as one of my best adjutants.¹¹⁹

For conservatives, security was sought in the incontrovertible ‘evidences’ of Biblical miracles and Paley’s natural religion. Liberals also appealed to verifiable facts. The issue between them was not so much methodology as the ‘factual’ starting point. Conservatives, for example, insisted on a literal Adam and Eve, a ‘young’ earth, and that sin was a perennial obstacle. Liberal John Clifford, in contrast, was of the opinion—based on his understanding of Henry Drummond’s *The Ascent of Man*—that humans were evolving morally and spiritually, and that ‘Man [...] is altruistic in the soul of him, in a world that is founded on altruism’.¹²⁰ Such liberal optimism was dealt a severe blow by Darwin’s observation that if God was the architect of nature, God must be ‘demonic’.¹²¹

In this climate, MacDonald’s quest to rehabilitate God relies not on challenging the foundations of truth, but, following Newman and Maurice, redefines truth in aesthetic terms; that truth is a ‘symbol’ that must be holistically discerned rather than a proposition to be believed. ‘The child’—imaginatively exploring a universe of uncertain novelty and mystery with fresh eyes—serves this agenda by offering a counterpoint to the hubris of certainty. He thus insists that ‘the truth of a thing is the blossom of it’.¹²² It is the aesthetic ‘surface’ of reality that speaks truth to the perceptive child; reality is a metaphor perceived—not primarily deductively or in-

¹¹⁸ J. A. James (1832) in *Religion in Victorian Britain, Volume III: Sources*, ed. by James R. Moore (Manchester: Manchester University Press/Open University, 1988), p. 132.

¹¹⁹ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (London: Independent Press, 1964), p. 85.

¹²⁰ *Nonconformity’s Romantic Generation*, p. 182.

¹²¹ Note 101.

¹²² *US3*, p. 69.

ductively—but ‘abductively’ (intuitively) by the power of childlike imagination.¹²³ This is why conservatives—despite the fact that MacDonald consistently calls himself a follower of Christ, affirms his reverence for the Bible as inspired, and preaches obedience to Christ—are so suspicious of MacDonald’s ‘new religion’: he is challenging the nature of truth and its factual foundations. Being a firm rejection of the inflexible logic of his forebears such as Samuel Rutherford who concluded that infants would be sent to hell¹²⁴—and therefore of a subsequent Evangelicalism that had failed to exorcise such doctrines despite efforts to become ‘softer’—MacDonald’s Christianity *does*, for those who subscribe to such views, amount to a ‘new religion’. There are, however, strong resonances with traditional themes, evident, for example, in his focus on faith as obedience rather than belief.¹²⁵ The latter, he argues, reduces Christianity to mere intellectual assent, whereas obedience to perceived truth resulting in moral improvement is the mark of the faithful.

Such views reflect the medieval understanding of ‘faith’.¹²⁶ Modernity was preoccupied with faith as *assensus*—intellectual assent to certain ‘enshrined’ propositions (that is, idolatrous concepts)—leading to the definition of a Christian as ‘someone who believes the right things’. This is constantly challenged by MacDonald, overtly in sermons such as ‘Justice’ and ‘Righteousness’ (*US3*), and covertly through the demolition of fictional hypocrites.¹²⁷ He repeatedly emphasises the need to be an obedient child, reflecting the three other medieval understandings of faith as *fiducia*—practical trust in God as the ‘rock of our salvation’ as opposed to being worried about tomorrow, *fidelitas*—loyalty and allegiance to God as opposed to infidelity, and *visio*—a way of seeing ‘with the eyes of faith’. The latter, rather than seeing the world adversarially as a place of threat resulting in a defensive posture or indifferently as a neutral place unconcerned about human being, views the world as life-giving, nourishing, and gracious, and embraces metaphor. Perhaps this ‘medievalism’ reflects the tendency of Romantics to look back at the golden age of chivalry rather than forward to a millennial utopia. However, I will argue that

¹²³ See page 114.

¹²⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), p. 101.

¹²⁵ Note 43.

¹²⁶ I am indebted to Marcus Borg for sowing the seeds of these ideas. See *The Heart of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 1989), pp. 28–37.

¹²⁷ Such as Robert Bruce in *Alec Forbes*.

this is not simply a nostalgia for a lost ideal, rather it is a rejection of present ‘unchildlikeness’ and the sense that humanity is becoming increasingly disconnected from transcendence. As John Pridmore perceptively remarks:

Childhood in Wordsworth is recollected. For MacDonald childhood is what is promised. Where Wordsworth is solaced by memory, MacDonald is upheld by hope. Childhood is not a lost estate to be mourned but a condition to which we must aspire.¹²⁸

One might say that MacDonald is redefining ‘orthodoxy’ in the medieval sense of ‘right worship’ rather than in the modern sense of ‘right belief’ as these three concepts of faith emphasise the need for an active response. *Visio*, central to Romantic theology, is especially important since it concerns the ability to see truly. In the *Curdie* novels, for example, light and vision are perennial themes connected to faith. The young princess Irene (‘peace’), lost on the mountain, glimpses the great-great-grandmother’s lamp in the distance. The grandmother, a theophany (‘the Mother of Light’)¹²⁹ whose lamp is an image of faith, had earlier said to Irene:

I will tell you a secret—if that light were to go out you would fancy yourself lying in a bare garret, on a heap of old straw, and would not see one of the pleasant things round about you all the time.¹³⁰

When the princess asks why more people don’t investigate this very obvious phenomenon (it shines in the neighbourhood), it is because they dismiss it—‘take it for a meteor, wink their eyes, and forget it again’. Now, desperate to find her way home:

the light that filled her eyes from the lamp, instead of blinding them for a moment to the object upon which they next fell, enabled her for a moment to see it, despite the darkness. By looking at the lamp and then dropping her eyes, she could see the road for a yard or two in front of her.¹³¹

Faith does not simply provide light, but gives one ‘good eyes’. The grandmother herself (God) is only visible to those with ‘good’ eyes. As she remarks to the other protagonist, the young miner Curdie:

¹²⁸ John Pridmore, ‘George MacDonald and the Languages of Liberal Spirituality’, *Modern Believing*, 39 (1998), 28–36 (p. 34).

¹²⁹ *The Princess and Curdie* (London: Blackie & Son, Limited, 1888), p. 51 (capitalised in the original).

¹³⁰ *The Princess and the Goblin* (London: Strahan & Co., 1872), p. 119 (an image that Lewis uses in *The Last Battle*).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

it is one thing what you or your father may think about me, and quite another what a foolish or bad man may see in me. For instance, if a thief were to come in here just now, he would think he saw the demon of the mine, all in green flames, come to protect her treasure, and would run like a hunted wild goat. I should be all the same, but his evil eyes would see me as I was not.¹³²

This passage illustrates a central thesis: that those with unchildlike ‘evil eyes’ have an erroneous vision of God as a ‘demon’, a vision (in both senses of the word) that needs to be exorcised from contemporary Christianity.

In Greville MacDonald’s view, the main difference between his father and John Ruskin was his father’s gift of ‘fairy vision’. Speaking of his father’s leaning towards the imaginative rather than the rational, he writes:

That instinct [...] was his exalted fairy vision, the light that in lighting every man reveals the secrets of all.

Far from its being the image of his own mind, as Ruskin whimsically said, that my father saw in the sky, it was, I think he would answer, only when man is purified of faith in the material—“the cloak and cloud which shadows me from Thee”—that he will see God.¹³³

MacDonald’s vision was, one might say, a fiduciary hermeneutic of a world which he saw as infused with ‘bright shoots of everlastingness’.¹³⁴ He chose to look at the world with the eyes of faith. That MacDonald sees differently to those such as Ruskin is not in question; what we do need to consider, however, is whether MacDonald is seeing truly. Is he, as Ruskin suggested, merely seeing a projection of his own fantasies in the sky? To phrase the question more precisely: does his work reveal aesthetic truth or aesthetic fantasy?

This introduction to MacDonald’s thought has outlined the influence of, and resonances with, historical and contemporary currents. We have also identified key ideas and questions. The task before us is to construct a coherent summary of MacDonald’s theology, a task that, because of his methodology and aversion to ‘systems’, involves assembling a mosaic from scattered fragments. The picture of ‘the child’ (henceforth not in quotes), it will be argued, is the

¹³² *The Princess and Curdie*, p. 56.

¹³³ *GMAW*, p. 339. The reference is to Henry Vaughan, *The Cock Crowing*.

¹³⁴ Vaughan, *The Retreat* in *ibid*.

dominant image, as it were, on the lid of the puzzle holding the key to its reassembly. However, before a closer reading of MacDonald it is necessary to consider the Victorian child.

Chapter 2 The Victorian child: social and theological attitudes

2.1 Sin and innocence

This chapter constructs the Victorian view of childhood as a benchmark against which to compare MacDonald's contrasting image (Chapter 3) as a precursor to considering how he uses it (Chapters 4–8). Since children are representative of the race (that is, already fully human, not merely potentially so), the 'theology of childhood' is central to Christian anthropology. It is therefore, as Karl Rahner observed, curious that there is no definitive articulation of such a theology.¹³⁵ Theological musings on the subject do, nevertheless, abound. They are the focus here and are far from inconsequential. Consider, for example, the following.

Western theology, since Augustine, has been preoccupied with the doctrine of original sin, a doctrine contested by Pelagius (and MacDonald): one side insisting that the child is essentially corrupt, the other that it is innocent.¹³⁶ Taking these emphases to their absurd conclusions with respect to child-rearing, we have, on the one hand, Coleridge's 'hands off' approach, leaving Hartley to be mothered by nature. On the other (rejecting the idea that nature, human or otherwise, is in any way benign) we have Jonathan Edwards's daughter, Esther Edwards Burr, writing in the 1750s that she has begun to use the whip on her ten-month-old daughter.¹³⁷ It is immediately apparent that MacDonald's assertion that God is a child is likely to raise significant questions for the later descendants of Jonathan Edwards.

For most of the nineteenth century, the Puritan view dominated: childhood was considered a necessary evil, a stage in life to be left behind as soon as possible (despite some insisting that childhood extended to the age of thirty).¹³⁸ Though such views had thawed somewhat by mid-century, attitudes to childhood were predominantly negative, especially in a religious community suspicious of childhood passion and vice—evidence of original sin. The ascendancy of evolutionism did little to emancipate childhood: the burden of original sin was simply ex-

¹³⁵ 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood', in *Theological Investigations*, 10 vols (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), VIII (iii), pp. 33–50 (p. 33).

¹³⁶ John Milbank notes that Augustine does *not* say that all humans are guilty of original sin. Rather, we are guilty, like the hands of a murderer, for the sin of the race. (*Being Reconciled* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 10.)

¹³⁷ *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754–1757*, in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. by Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 327.

¹³⁸ Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 20.

changed for that of collective racial memory as the ‘little savages’ in their cots were deemed to not only recapitulate the dawn of humanity, but carry collective memories of a natural history which, unlike the benign vision of the Romantics, was red in tooth and claw. It led to *fin de siècle* pessimism, such as that of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*; a vision of children burdened with inchoate ancestral memories, predetermined by heredity, and unmoved by free will. *Jude* graphically expresses the logical outcome of evolutionary determinism, particularly—according to Shuttleworth—the depressingly pessimistic version of Schopenhauer. Thus the category of childhood, viewed as a period of innocence and naivety, is waning by the end of the century, if not abolished.¹³⁹ For Hardy, all children are ‘old’, dramatized most clearly in the child nicknamed Father Time who, according to Hardy, was ‘Age masquerading as Juvenility, and doing it so badly that his real self showed through the crevices’; a child made in the image of God, perhaps, but ‘an enslaved and dwarfed Divinity’.¹⁴⁰ For Hardy, childhood is illusory.

MacDonald’s suggestion that God is a child is, therefore, a radical challenge to theology and forces reconsideration of the value of childhood. MacDonald, like Hardy, conflates age and youth but he reverses the analogy, underlining the eternity, as well as the childlikeness, of God: it is adulthood with its pretentious cultural accretions, its selfishness, and its power-lust that is false; the goal of humanity is not to leave childhood behind as soon as possible, but to embrace it and emulate the God that is ‘Juvenility masquerading as Age’. The goal of life is divine childlikeness. It is adulthood, not childhood, that is synonymous with sin.

Whether viewed positively, negatively, or simply ignored, childhood was at the heart of the Victorian world. ‘The figure of the child’, Shuttleworth suggests,

lies at the heart of nineteenth-century discourses of gender, race, and selfhood: a figure who is by turns animal, savage, or female, but who is located not in the distant colonies, nor in the mists of evolutionary time, but at the very centre of English domestic life.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 353.

¹⁴⁰ *Jude the Obscure* (London: Everyman, 1995), p. 261 (see also *Mind of the Child*, p. 340).

¹⁴¹ *Mind of the Child*, p. 4.

2.2 Early and mid-nineteenth century attitudes to childhood

2.2 (a) Natural religion and the Romantic inheritance

At the outset we note, with Ann Wierda Rowland, that ‘the history of children and the history of childhood are two different things’; that the child as a social construct has a somewhat tenuous relationship to the lived experiences of real children.¹⁴² Lamentations regarding the loss or erosion of childhood have more to do with the former.¹⁴³ This distinction goes some way towards accounting for Judith Plotz’s complaint that Romantic ideas did little to contribute to reform. Her work nevertheless reveals the weakness of developing philosophical ideas at some distance from social context. Wordsworth, for example, stands accused of using his Romantic idealism to justify parental neglect,¹⁴⁴ and that this distortion of reality—the separation of the child from both the adult and the real world—is prescient of later Romantic texts that set a lone child against the world (see below). Plotz is not impressed:

This separation of adult from child defines the Wordsworthian child. It is not innocent radiance or joy, but an aesthetically embalmed apartheid that constitutes Wordsworth’s major contribution to the nineteenth-century literature of childhood.¹⁴⁵

Theoretically at least, however, childhood for the Romantics *was* a state of ‘innocent radiance or joy’ where the infant mind was not only attuned to nature’s ministrations, but ‘trailing clouds of glory’ as if still semi-conscious of its divine origin. Wordsworth’s manifesto on childhood, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, suggested that such awareness progressively waned, such that

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.¹⁴⁶

Prior to adulthood, the child mind, with its innate receptivity to divine things, is tutored by a sacramental nature. Thus, writing in 1781, a Scottish writer (strikingly at odds with his Calvinist compatriots) optimistically observed that ‘Children are especially susceptible of in-

¹⁴² *Romanticism and Childhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 7.

¹⁴³ A recent example might be Rowan Williams’s observation that the space called ‘childhood’ is being eroded by a society bent on exploiting its children. (Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (London: Morehouse, 2000), p. 20.)

¹⁴⁴ *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 62.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁶ *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p. 142.

struction with regard to natural religion. The being of a God, and the worship due to him being engraved on the mind, make a branch of our nature', concluding that, 'It is easy to fortify in children the belief of a Deity, because his existence is engraved on the human heart.'¹⁴⁷ Anticipating mid-Victorian criticism of religious education, the author expresses a MacDonaldian sentiment:

Religious education thus carried on, instead of inspiring gloominess, and despondence, will contribute more than any other means to serenity of mind and cheerfulness of temper [...]. Surely any frightful notion of the Deity, must have a dismal effect on a tender mind, susceptible of every impression, of fear above all.¹⁴⁸

Rowland credits Scottish Romanticism with providing much of the foundation for the Romantic discourse on childhood, noting that the work of Adam Smith and John Millar did much to reinforce the equation of antiquity with childhood. Emphasising the developmental nature of society, the ancient savage was seen both as a childhood figure at the dawn of civilisation and as an 'elder'—a repository of ancient wisdom. Such views informed the view of the child mind as ancient well before ideas of evolutionary recapitulation. Most writers in the wake of Locke, Rowland argues, 'embrace a theory of infancy and development that allow them to compare child and savage'. Primitive man is a 'big baby', and childhood language is that of the savage.¹⁴⁹

'Savage' childhood language and behaviour implied two things: first, inexperience, meaning that new words had to be invented (or old ones recycled) every time a new experience was encountered; and second, emotional displays unchecked by the constraints of civilisation. Thus imagination was 'closely associated with the ignorance and inexperience of infancy', and was something that civilised people grew out of.¹⁵⁰ In a phrase that MacDonald would have applauded, Rowland observes: 'Infancy thus represents an embodied imaginative state.'¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ 'Education with Respect to Religion', *The Scots magazine*, 1739–1803, 43 (1781), 149–52 (p. 149).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ *Romanticism and Childhood*, pp. 81, 88.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 95.

2.2 (b) The Romantic theology of childhood

Those such as Samuel Law Wilson concluded that they and MacDonald worshipped different deities.¹⁵² Do the claims of Romanticism (and the child in particular) justify such a conclusion?

Judith Plotz thinks so—that the Romantic obsession with the ideal nature-communing child led to its deification. Schiller (an influence on MacDonald),¹⁵³ she argues, contributed to this by insisting on the child’s mediatory role through its affinity with a nature conceived as virgin and untainted by culture—a mediation ‘affording us a retrospective view of ourselves, and revealing more closely the unnatural in us’.¹⁵⁴ Aligning the child mind with nature, beyond the vicissitudes of history and the corruption of culture, places it in a virgin territory of immutability and timeless antiquity. Age and infancy are again conflated. Coleridge’s musings in *Frost at Midnight* over the young Hartley reflect this: the baby merges with nature, ‘wander[ing] like a breeze by lakes and sandy shores’, listening to the ‘eternal language which thy God utters’.

While Coleridge is firmly wedded to a Christian God, Plotz is unsure about his successors. She points to a common Romantic trope of a make-believe kingdom presided over by a child-redeemer. Whether the creations of children or adult authors,¹⁵⁵ The Child, instead of merely connecting to a higher power, becomes that power, a permeating life-giving force—an idolatrous concept transplanted into the real world. ‘As an imaginary kingdom,’ she writes, ‘it is almost always figured as a lost garden paradise presided over by a child-redeemer or child-idol: “Infancy is the perpetual Messiah which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise” (Emerson, “Nature” 54).’¹⁵⁶

In Plotz’s view, it is but a short step from adulation of the concept of the quintessential child to worship of *The Child*—a being ‘who figures powerfully in Golden Age children’s liter-

¹⁵² See page 18.

¹⁵³ MacDonald’s *Rampolli* (London: Longman, Green, & Co., 1897) contains nineteen pages of Schiller in translation.

¹⁵⁴ Friedrich von Schiller, *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795) in *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁵ De Quincey, Thomas Malkin, Hartley Coleridge, the Brontës, and James Barrie are listed (*ibid.*, p. 3).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

ature, especially male-authored fantasy literature'.¹⁵⁷ The Romantic discourse on childhood, she writes,

made it easy, unavoidable almost, to assume the living reality and splendor of such an essential being as *The Child*, who is unmarked by time, place, class, or gender but is represented as in all places and all times the same.¹⁵⁸

We will consider later what relationship MacDonald's Child-God has to the child of Romanticism, but I suggest that Plotz's theology of *The Child* seems somewhat overstated: practical belief in 'the living reality and splendor of such an essential being as *The Child*' seems unlikely. It seems more reasonable to accept Rowland's evaluation of the 'ideal child' as a motif for expressing interiority and innocence—it evokes a 'natural' state, and an interior, remembered existence.¹⁵⁹

The preoccupation with childhood (at least in print) was very much a middle- and upper-class affair. Plotz's main case is that Romanticism is characterised by a higher-class aloofness from real social issues combined with an incorrigible idealism. This is no doubt true, but it seems excessive to accept Alan Yui's claim that 'there are no children in Wordsworth's poetry',¹⁶⁰ or that the Romantics were bereft of any real understanding of childhood. Plotz does, however, remind us that the Romantic child is essentially a literary symbol, idealised and coloured by class prejudices. This explains why many of MacDonald's child characters appear to hover improbably above their surrounding grime, and is a reminder not to dismiss them summarily without considering their symbolic value.

2.2 (c) Class, gender, and the child-mind

The realm of the nursery was female—where even young boys were dressed in petticoats—with little connection with the thrusting male world of commerce and empire. Men knew little of this sequestered 'dark heart' of the home which, as evolutionary theories took hold, was seen as a savage place where infant language mirrored that of primeval 'man' (or animals), or where

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁵⁹ *Romanticism and Childhood*, p. 26.

¹⁶⁰ *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, p. 85.

(perhaps justifiably) folklore and old wives' tales held sway over education.¹⁶¹ It was a woman's place—her highest destiny—and therefore she had little need of education, not least because any energy diverted to her brain was sure to undermine her reproductive ability.¹⁶² Fathers were advised to foster a sense of veneration in their daughters on the grounds that '[t]he intimacy bred of taking liberties is a fatal exchange for the deep sense of trustful reverence'. The husband was the 'family's monarch' and advised to 'allow his girls to listen to the conversation without expecting to be included in it'.¹⁶³

Childhood studies dawned in this world of gender and class division, fuelled by strong religious sentiment. Who was this creature at the heart of the nursery that was riddled with original sin or (later in the century) burdened with racial memory, that could speak the language of animal and human ancestors, that was at once innocent and irretrievably corrupt?

It is, perhaps, surprising that childhood studies as a discipline had not developed earlier, considering the Romantic obsession with the child,¹⁶⁴ nevertheless the Romantics did bequeath to the Victorians ideas about the child mind which, as Plotz somewhat predictably opines, were entirely misguided. The Romantic obsession with childhood connectedness to nature led to the valuing of *disconnectedness* from adult society. It was considered laudable to shield a child for as long as possible from quotidian reality in order to foster a sense of holism. Plotz, however, citing the work of twentieth-century Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, argues that this prevents the development of a healthy sense of self, observing that 'Piaget labels as [mental] defects the very attributes the Romantics cite as excellences'.¹⁶⁵

Romantic notions of childhood innocence contrasted, in Victorian times, with an obsession with original sin and its later correlate, savage racial memory. The child became an accident waiting to happen, and mothers, nurses, and tutors were admonished to watch for signs of incipient decline. Babies, and even the foetus *in utero*, were deemed to be susceptible to mad-

¹⁶¹ *Romanticism and Childhood*, pp. 204–05.

¹⁶² Shuttleworth writes: 'At its most extreme, Clouston and Maudsley and others insisted that the exertion of intellectual energies would seriously impair female reproductive development' (*Mind of the Child*, p. 210).

¹⁶³ 'Art. II.-1. Essays on Practical Education', *Christian Remembrancer*, 51 (1866), 21–49 (p. 46).

¹⁶⁴ The science of child development is normally traced to Darwin's 'A Biographical Sketch of an Infant' in the journal *Mind* in 1877 (*Mind of the Child*, p. 221).

¹⁶⁵ *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, p. 28.

ness,¹⁶⁶ the first post-natal sign of which was prattling nonsense and an over-fertile imagination, and that uncontrollable malady of *passion* which was to be early nipped in the bud. John Haslam, apothecary to Bethlehem Hospital, who included in his *Observations on Madness and Melancholy* (1809) a chapter on ‘Cases of Insane Children’,¹⁶⁷ highlights not only the hereditary nature of insanity, but its roots in faulty education—particularly one deficient in morality, here defined as failing to subjugate passions—

which often plant in the youthful mind the seeds of madness which the slightest circumstances readily awaken into growth. It should be as much the object of the teachers of youth, to subjugate the passions, as to discipline the intellect.¹⁶⁸

While the prevailing view was that childhood make-believe and play (or the even more dreadful secret sins of lying and masturbation—sexual ‘precocity’) heralded insanity or even death, some had more tolerant views. The *Cambridge University Magazine*, for example, reports as early as 1841 that ‘the common idea of the imagination is, we believe, far below its true elevation’, and traces misconceptions to ‘too slight attentions to the real operations of the mind’, and a propensity to divide mental processes artificially. It advises:

Away with this cold “cutting up” of that glorious *unity* called MIND; of whose several kinds and species of *operation* are so inseparably linked together, and harmoniously blended.¹⁶⁹

These sentiments presage, as we shall see, later Victorian liberalism.

Nevertheless, the subjugation of the passions and the discipline of the intellect is a familiar refrain permeating the early Victorian narrative and was the primary goal of education.

2.2 (d) Mid-century debate and religious education

By mid-century, secularization and the growing awareness of child psychology were influencing educational debates. Questions were raised about whether Sunday schools should teach secular subjects, whether state schools should teach religion, whether children should be forced to learn quickly or allowed to ‘flower’ naturally, or, indeed, whether schooling (for the poor) was

¹⁶⁶ James Crichton Browne, ‘Psychical Diseases of Early Life’, *Asylum Journal of Mental Science* (1860), in *Mind of the Child*, p. 21.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ ‘Literature and Imagination’, *Cambridge University Magazine*, 2 (1841), 58–67 (p. 58).

necessary at all. On the basis that ‘the whole theological world’ was in disarray, in 1875, the religiously sceptical *Westminster Review* questioned the wisdom of ‘enthraling children’s minds with the fetters of doubtful doctrine’.¹⁷⁰ This polemic against the ‘religionists’, caricaturing educational practices over the previous decades, reveals popular views.

Anglicanism is targeted by considering E. B. Ramsay’s *Manual of Catechetical Instruction*. The methodology is forensic, even inquisitorial, with rote learning seen as the route to forming much-needed ‘precise and correct ideas’. Ramsay claims that three of the questions ‘involve an abstract of the whole theory of Coleridge’s “Aids to Reflection”’.¹⁷¹ Noting that the work is aimed at seven- to ten-year-olds, this draws a predictably sarcastic reaction:

Those who are conversant with this eminently philosophical work will be able to estimate the adaptability of the “Manual” to the mental calibre of the young.¹⁷²

There is ‘a total disregard of the principles of psychology’, and children are left with ‘the impression that salvation depends on correctly remembering words that convey no possible meaning’.¹⁷³ Ramsay, admitting that ‘[i]t must appear as if directed to the head’, nevertheless wants to foster ‘tender feeling [in] his young pupils, and to call forth the emotions of the heart’,¹⁷⁴ but the *Review* is quick to point out that it is liable to have the opposite effect. Passages concerning guilt and damnation are especially injurious to young girls of a nervous disposition who are apt to ‘dwell much on anything which might raise a misgiving or an anxiety’. The conclusion is: ‘The power of imagination is not sufficiently taken into account in dealing with the young.’¹⁷⁵

The negative psychological effects of religious indoctrination on children were a topic of current debate. The *Review* cites a medical report claiming that religious fervour accounted for 3% of admissions to mental asylums,¹⁷⁶ leading to the conclusion that learning half-understood statements concerning the awful consequences of disobedience leads to mental breakdown in

¹⁷⁰ ‘Art. IV. The Religious Education of Children’, *Westminster Review*, 48 (1875), 374–90 (p. 377).

¹⁷¹ *A Manual of Catechetical Instruction*, 6th edn (Edinburgh: R. Grant and Son, 1851), p. xvii.

¹⁷² ‘The Religious Education of Children’, p. 377.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

¹⁷⁴ *Catechetical Instruction*, p. xix.

¹⁷⁵ ‘The Religious Education of Children’, p. 381.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 383, footnote.

the young.¹⁷⁷ This catechetical approach, however, was more likely to produce boredom and frustration than madness. The liberal Unitarian journal *The Theological Review* notes in passing, while discussing Sunday Schools, that:

Some of those who have come over from orthodoxy [...] evidently conceive of religious instruction as identical with the inculcation of theological dogmas, and associating these with their painful remembrance of catechisms and creeds, reach a decided conclusion against bringing young scholars, at any rate, under any sort of religious training.¹⁷⁸

Many parents, it seems, who had suffered under Ramsay's *Manual*, had—for ten years at least—simply refused to subject their children to the same ordeal.

The second example given, however, was more likely to result in madness.¹⁷⁹ In *Sermons for the Very Young* (1864), '[t]he Deity is habitually represented as an angry judge ready to inflict endless, unutterable tortures upon the trembling and despairing sinner', and psychological pressure is used to effect conversion by describing 'the most horrible scenes [of hell] which cruelty and fanaticism could devise'.¹⁸⁰ It carries heart-breaking and gruesome tales of God visiting vengeance on sinners, such as the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, where, after retiring one night, the unfortunate inhabitants asked:

What a rumbling sound wakes them from their slumbers? What glare of light breaks into their chambers? Whence the fearful cry—the shriek of horror? The wrath of God is upon them. Do they repent now of their sins? It is too late.¹⁸¹

It is preceded by the advice: 'Think, little child, of the fearful story.'

The *Review* notes that since it is repeatedly stressed that God does not hear the prayers of sinners, and that '[e]ven when we wish to do right there is something wrong in it',¹⁸² the child is left with no option but to consider itself eternally damned.¹⁸³ It illustrates the theological belief that a 'state of hopeless degradation [is] the normal condition of children', and results in the de-

¹⁷⁷ Crichton Browne's paper (note 166) lists, among others, 'theomania' (*Mind of the Child*, p. 38).

¹⁷⁸ 'IV. Sunday-Schools', *Theological Review*, 2 (6) (1865), 74–92 (p. 79).

¹⁷⁹ The mental strain produced by fervent evangelism is discussed further on pages 166–168.

¹⁸⁰ 'The Religious Education of Children', p. 382.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 384–85.

¹⁸³ Charles West (founder of Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children) reports: 'Some of the most painful death-beds which I have ever witnessed' were the result of such theology. (*On Some of the Disorders of the Nervous System in Childhood* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1871), p. 119.)

struction of ‘self respect’, ‘a sense of guilt’, and ‘consciousness of an Unseen Power full of anger [...] armed with a fearful system of punishment’—all of which act negatively on ‘sympathetic feelings’, ‘higher aspirations’, and ‘the moral tone’.¹⁸⁴

Psychological manipulation of a more ‘hysterical’ nature is exemplified by ‘The Happy Child and the Wicked Mother’ in *Familiar Talks with the Children* (1870), a volume of sentimental tales where saintly, weeping children sacrifice their young lives on behalf of reprobate parents who, in consequence, weep themselves (mothers) or turn from alcohol (fathers).

This article, though sarcastic, reveals a continuing felt need (among ‘religionists’) to save the child from itself—to deliver it from its essence, its childlikeness, in processes reminiscent of exorcism. In all these schemes, childhood is valued for its potential, not for its essence—a necessary evil prior to adulthood. Whether couched in commercial or religious terms, the goal of childhood was to escape from it as soon as possible in order to become either a commercial contributor to society (or a fecund mother) or a consenting adult destined for heaven. In the catechetical approach, the goal is for the child to find refuge from itself in the mother Church; the child’s imagination is acknowledged but then virtually ignored, the goal being to supplant childish fancy with adult rationality. The last two methods reflect the Evangelical pressure for a ‘decision’—an activity also, ironically, normally reserved for adults. In these cases, the imagination is engaged, but then abused. The ‘decision’ is to turn away from one’s corrupt nature, to renounce oneself. In the words of a mid-century Wesleyan, for example:

It must be remembered that the fault of human nature is not merely weakness,— it is *corruption*; and that a renewal cannot spring from any change that intellectual cultivation may effect.¹⁸⁵

Moreover, as we are here discussing the education of children, we are reminded that:

The only armour which is hell-proof is—“*It is written.*” [...] Our wisdom is to wrap the family of man as early as possible in that impenetrable mail.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ ‘The Religious Education of Children’, p. 385.

¹⁸⁵ ‘Shall Religion Be Separated from Secular Education?’, *Wesleyan-Methodist magazine*, 10 (1854), 343–49 (p. 344).

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

Notwithstanding the child's immaturity and inherited defects (from Adam, the apes, or merely parents), we are reminded, somewhat ominously, that while the law might regard children as exculpable minors, God does not:

[The Bible's] best promises are made to young people. It tells us of "little ones" who are admitted into covenant with the Lord. It details judgements that have been inflicted on children.¹⁸⁷

In contrast, however misguided the Romantics were about the nature of childhood, they nevertheless valued it both as a physical state and a social construct. Although Coleridge does muse poetically over the sleeping Hartley about what he might *become*, there is nevertheless a celebration of who the baby *is*. This contrasts with the (especially male) Victorian impatience with, and distance from, childhood, an impatience which translated into schools bent on forcing their young charges towards premature flowering, 'hot-houses' which not only produced early flowering and fruiting, but often an early death. The mid-Victorian years were full of debate as to whether such practices should be tolerated.¹⁸⁸

In summary, the early- and mid-century consensus among 'religionists' was that child-likeness equated to irrationality, emotional instability driven by a surfeit of passion (especially in girls), immorality due to an unregenerate soul (evidenced particularly by the sins of lying and masturbation, both especially feared as they were beyond the sphere of adult control),¹⁸⁹ and unproductiveness (both commercial and sexual) and therefore of little commercial or social value. In addition, the nonconformist pressure for a 'decision' for Christ not only illustrates the negative view of childhood itself, but blurs the boundary between childhood and adulthood:¹⁹⁰ not only must children make 'adult' moral decisions, they must also suffer the penalties for not doing so.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ *Mind of the Child*, p. 107.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 65–66.

¹⁹⁰ According to Rowan Williams, a perennial issue. (*Lost Icons*, pp. 30–31.)

Such negative views of childhood, combined with the idea that education should take into account God's pre-ordained social class divisions,¹⁹¹ form the backdrop to MacDonald's work. As we will explore, he firmly challenges the former but has a tendency to idealise the latter.

2.3 Post Darwin and *fin de siècle* attitudes to childhood

The Wesleyan article cited above is a polemical broadside against encroaching secularism peppered with Bible verses flung in anger. It illustrates the vehemence of mid-century debates whose temperature was raised even higher when Darwin published *Origin*. A major front in the battle concerned childhood and children, especially their education, reflecting increasing unease with the doctrine of original sin and growing awareness of child psychology.

Judith Plotz's complaint that Romantic theory had lost touch with reality might well be levelled at much of the Victorian discourse about childhood. The polarity and zealousness of both the Christian and evolutionist/secularist camps is striking when reading Victorian texts. Both sides made strong, often absurd, claims based on scant knowledge of children themselves (the theorists on both sides were primarily male who had little cause to visit the nursery). One thinks, for example, of Adolf Kussmaul's unlikely declaration that infants are born deaf,¹⁹² or Dr Louis Robinson's experiments which consisted of suspending new-borns from branches as evidence of simian ancestry,¹⁹³ or of George John Romanes's claim that seven-week-old infants have the intelligence of a mollusc.¹⁹⁴ It was even suggested that 'rock a bye baby in the treetops' offered evidence of our 'arboreal ancestry'.¹⁹⁵

The growing child study movement was also, at first, reluctant to engage in the messy business of interacting with real children; there was also a widespread tendency to use fictional characters as source material for 'scientific' child studies, and to accept decidedly apocryphal

¹⁹¹ The Exeter Diocesan Board, for example, felt the need to improve the education of the poor 'by making it more efficient in preparing persons for the duties assigned to them by Providence' ('Education on Church Principles', *Christian Remembrancer*, 21 (1839), 299–300). From a Dissenting perspective: 'If a man best learns his duty by studying the Scriptures, he certainly must improve his disposition to fulfil his task in "that state of life to which it has pleased God to call him"' (I. P., 'Thoughts on the Education of the Poor', *Monthly Magazine, or, British Register*, 31 (1811), 217–21 (p. 219)).

¹⁹² Adolf Kussmaul, *Untersuchungen über das Seelenleben des neugeborenen Menschen* (Leipzig and Heidelberg, 1859), see *Mind of the Child*, p. 223.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

¹⁹⁴ A chart published by Romanes in 1883 showed the human baby as achieving the intelligence of a mollusc at seven weeks, a reptile at four months, and at fourteen weeks to have reached the level of higher crustacea. (*Ibid.*, p. 255).

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

accounts of child behaviour at face value. The latter included a widely-disseminated eighteenth century account of the ‘insane baby’ that had to be held down by four nurses to prevent it climbing up the nursery walls (evidence of insanity in infants),¹⁹⁶ and (as late as 1911) a report in a work called *Child Nurture* claimed that ‘scientific fathers in Germany’ had taken to dropping infants from first-floor windows to see if they would land on all fours like a kitten.¹⁹⁷ Even the otherwise reasonable James Sully seemed to accept the 1779 account of the famous four-year-old, Christian Heinrich Heineken of Lübeck, as a credible ‘prodigy of learning’:

Handed over to his tutor whilst still a baby, the infant was said to have mastered the Old Testament by the age of one, the history of the ancient world, universal geography, and Latin by the age of two and a half, and the deeper mysteries of dogmatic theology and ecclesiastical history by the age of four, by which time his fame had spread across Europe.¹⁹⁸

The use of fictional *literary* texts to provide case histories was also widespread, leading to a symbiotic relationship between scientists and authors with each fuelling the others’ output. It is unsurprising that under such conditions strange theories developed, often surrounding the paranoia towards sexual ‘precocity’ that inevitably had a negative effect on the lives of children and included, for example, Isaac Baker Brown performing clitoridectomies on girls as young as ten to cure them of insanity.¹⁹⁹

However misguided, such theorising and practice demonstrates awareness and exploration of this newly-discovered continent called ‘childhood’ embedded in the heart of society. The child was a hot topic.

2.3 (a) Saint, sinner, or savage?

The eighteenth century Romantic notion of the child mind as a blank slate on whose virgin surface nature writes divine truth created the saintly child: a positive, if naive, construction of childhood. The ascendancy of the Puritan emphasis on original sin among Protestant Evangelicals in the nineteenth century created the sinner child, placing a social burden on children, now constantly watched by their guardians for signs of incipient sin (or insanity), and drilled by the

¹⁹⁶ Discussed by Crichton Browne in ‘Psychical Diseases’, cited in *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁹⁹ Until 1866, when expelled from the Obstetrical Society. (*Ibid.*, p. 36.)

Catechism, or its nonconformist equivalent, memorising Bible verses. The literary image of the sadistic schoolmaster dramatizes the pressure on children. Henry Maudsley, in a chapter entitled ‘Insanity in Early Life’ in *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind* (1868)—‘one of the first accounts that placed childhood mental disorders in an evolutionary perspective’²⁰⁰—records the imprisonment of a schoolmaster for beating a child to death (in his view an insane child),²⁰¹ and notes occurrences of mania linked to religious fervour:

A boy of about eleven years of age who came under my care [...] moved about restlessly, throwing his arms about and repeating over and over again such expressions as—“The good Lord Jesus,” “They put Him on the cross,” “They nailed His hands,” &c: it was impossible to fix his attention for a moment.²⁰²

Clearly the pressure on real children from this philosophical page-turn was not positive.

Despite making confident medical pronouncements, Maudsley’s work reveals a more ambivalent attitude to the *cause* of immoral behaviour, as if feeling his way in the uncertain territory opened up by Darwin. On the one hand, childhood insanity is caused by original sin or demons.²⁰³

To talk about the purity and innocence of a child’s mind is a part of that [...] poetical idealism and willing hypocrisy by which a man ignores realities [...]. By nature sinful above everything, and desperately wicked,²⁰⁴ man acquires a knowledge of good through evil.²⁰⁵

In other words, God will use evil such that humans evolve morally. On the other hand, he recognises the role of hereditary and evolutionary factors: the infant has ‘the latent power of an actual evolution which no monkey ever has; in it is contained [...] the influence of all mankind

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 181.

²⁰¹ Henry Maudsley, *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1868), pp. 328–29.

²⁰² Ibid., pp. 313–14.

²⁰³ Quoted is an account, from one ‘Griesinger from Kerner’, of a girl of eleven, a ‘pious Christian child’, who, in ‘a deep bass voice [...] kept repeating the words, “They are praying for thee.”... On the evening of the 22nd January another voice, quite different from the bass one, spoke incessantly while the crisis lasted... now and then interrupted by the former bass voice regularly repeating the recitative... What, however, gave a distinctive character to its expressions was the moral or rather immoral tone of them—pride, arrogance, scorn, and hatred of truth, God, Christ, that were declared. The situation was resolved when a voice cried out [from the girl]—“Get thee out of this girl, thou unclean spirit”’ (ibid., pp. 317–18).

²⁰⁴ Jer. 17.9.

²⁰⁵ *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, p. 322.

that has gone before'.²⁰⁶ Whether inherited from Adam or the apes, depravity was nevertheless seen as the nascent state of the child.

2.3 (b) Imagination and insanity in childhood

Mid-century child psychology saw 'adult sanity [as] dependent on the ruthless control of imaginative visions within childhood'.²⁰⁷ Maudsley, Shuttleworth argues, compounded the negative views of childhood imagination by associating it with animal savagery. Using Coleridge's terminology but rejecting his theology, he equates childhood fantasy with animal passions:

The instincts, appetites, or passions, call them as we may, manifest themselves in unblushing, extreme, and perverted action; the veil of any control which discipline may have fashioned is rent; the child is as the animal, and reveals its animal nature with as little shamefacedness as the monkey indulges its passions in the face of all the world.²⁰⁸

Elsewhere Maudsley makes it clear that childish passion is no more than an animal reaction to an external stimulus:

Children and savages best exhibit in a naked simplicity the different passions that result from the affectation of self by what, when painful, is deemed an ill; when pleasurable, a good.²⁰⁹

The terms 'unblushing', 'indulging passions in the face of all the world', and 'naked simplicity' clearly reinforce the association of sexual curiosity with mental disease (apparently ignoring the fact that young children have very little interest in sexuality). There is also the blurring of the boundary between normal and pathological childlike behaviour: Maudsley appears to equate normal childhood—certainly infancy—with insanity. Some thirty years later, Havelock Ellis suggested that criminals were those trapped in a savage evolutionary stage by arrested development: in a case of guilt by association, children were now viewed (at least potentially) as insane *and* criminal. Shuttleworth remarks that:

Ellis, building on these theories, argued that moral insanity in the child, exhibited through eccentricity, lying, bad sexual habits, and cruelty to animals, was the first stage of 'instinctive criminali-

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 333.

²⁰⁷ *Mind of the Child*, p. 45.

²⁰⁸ *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, p. 322. See also *Mind of the Child*, p. 182.

²⁰⁹ *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind*, p. 150.

ty'. As for Maudsley, children were closer to the animal or savage state than adults, and the insane child even more so.²¹⁰

Charles West (founder of Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital) offered a more benign view of childhood imagination. Noting the terror experienced by children facing death that had been over-zealously catechised or evangelised, he sympathises with their emotional turmoil:

the dark grave is realised, or, at least, imagined more vividly than its conqueror; and the little child [is] driven to look within for the evil which it does not know, and cannot find, but vaguely dreads, and would be sorry for if it knew it.²¹¹

Undeveloped reasoning powers in a child, he argues, lead to 'exaggerated [...] perceptive faculties [and] a vividness of [...] imagination'. Because of this, 'the griefs of childhood may be, in proportion to the child's power of bearing them, as overwhelming as those which break the strong man down',²¹² leading to a plea for compassion:

These facts deserve special attention; they prove how much more the susceptibility and sensitiveness of children need to be taken into consideration than is commonly done. This keenness of the emotions in children displays itself in other ways, and has constantly to be borne in mind in our management of them.²¹³

West closes his lecture by suggesting that the only thing which offers any hope for the suffering child is that Jesus welcomed children into his arms despite their not having learned the Creed.

West's criticism as a Catholic of what we would now call fundamentalist Christianity, his Romantic leanings, his qualified acceptance of Darwinism while insisting on 'a perfection to be attained not here, but higher',²¹⁴ represents a liberal middle road which contrasts with the polarised views we have discussed. Of note is the rejection of inherent depravity in childhood, however caused, replacing this with a more nuanced understanding of the causes and power of childhood passions, underscored by a belief in a benevolent God.

²¹⁰ *Mind of the Child*, p. 183, n. 8; p. 206.

²¹¹ *Disorders of the Nervous System in Childhood*, p. 119.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

2.4 The nineteenth century child

We have considered the Victorian child as a social construct, a literary device, and a theological metaphor. None may directly bear on the biological and psychological state we call childhood, but all contribute to a theological anthropology and, inasmuch as the child bears the *imago Dei*, in some measure touch on views regarding God's nature. Protestant Evangelicalism, however, tended to focus on the distortion, even obliteration, of that *imago*. The focus on original sin and the corresponding development of a religious 'forcing apparatus' to drive this out of the child is, in some measure, a denial of the humanity of the child. It says that the child is something 'other' which, without intervention, will grow into something sub-human.

A contrast has emerged between Romantic views of a benign nature nurturing the innocent child-mind and Puritan ideas disdainful of such optimism. However, it must be noted that these two opposing ideologies were always present: 'Most scholars agree that Evangelical ideology held firmer sway in the early years of the century while the romantic gradually gained influence, yet both existed at the same time to varying degrees.'²¹⁵ In the next chapter we will consider more closely the Victorian theology of childhood and MacDonald's particular contribution to the debate.

²¹⁵ Christine Sutphin, 'Victorian Childhood: Reading Beyond the "Innocent Title": *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes*', in *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, ed. by Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 51–77 (p. 54).

Chapter 3 George MacDonald's contribution to childhood

3.1 The metaphysical child

The tension between Victorian secularists and 'religionists' concerned beliefs rather than methodology. Although beginning from different starting points—the former, a new, secular reading of the book of nature, the latter, a traditional, 'scientific', reading of the Book—both claimed to be 'scientific'. In contrast, it is ironic that in the growing field of child studies, much of the debate took place in the literary realm—that of speculative imagination. Sally Shuttleworth insists that this was *the* major forum where social (and many theological) ideas were developed and where the figure of the child was central.²¹⁶ John Pennington and Jean Webb point to the realist novel as being the literary expression of positivism, and that fantasy novels such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice* or MacDonald's *North Wind* expressed a mid-century return to metaphysics.²¹⁷ For Pennington, it is 'a reaction against literary trends and conventions, and metafictionists often undercut and parody these conventions to suggest that our sense of "reality" is tenuous'.²¹⁸ This certainly characterises MacDonald's work: he regularly challenges convention, particularly so in tales such as *North Wind*, a novel that invites the reader to explore the world through the eyes of a child.

Colin Manlove, earlier in his career, saw MacDonald's fantasy writing in negative terms as a 'self-protecting silencing of his intellect'; later, however, he concedes that it is an attempt to demonstrate that God is beyond rational, theological systems, and that 'MacDonald believed that Christianity had much more to do with lived than proved truths'.²¹⁹ This is no doubt true, but is MacDonald therefore guilty of being anti-intellectual? Is the child protagonist of *North Wind*, for example, too good to be true? Or do we side with him when he remarks that *nothing* can be too good to be true?

²¹⁶ *Mind of the Child*, p. 3.

²¹⁷ *Behind the Back of the North Wind*, ed. by John Pennington and Roderick McGillis (Hamden CT: Winged Lion Press, 2011), pp. 53, 175.

²¹⁸ 'Alice at the Back of the North Wind, or the Metafictions of Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald', in *Behind the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 52–62 (p. 53).

²¹⁹ 'A Reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*', in *Behind the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 148–74 (p. 150).

“There are very few things good enough to be true,” said Diamond; “but I hope this is. Too good to be true it can’t be. Isn’t true good? and isn’t good good? And how, then, can anything be too good to be true?”²²⁰

With these issues in mind, we close this chapter by exploring *North Wind* in relation to childhood and metaphysics (especially since the protagonist is described as ‘a true child in this, that he was given to metaphysics’),²²¹ but first we consider more closely the debate surrounding childhood innocence and evil.

3.2 MacDonald’s vision of the innocent child

A preoccupation with original sin, rather than the *imago Dei* (original blessing), distinguished ‘harder’ Evangelicals from their more flexible counterparts; however, this was not confined to Evangelicalism. Here we consider how high churchman H. E. Manning (later Cardinal of Westminster) made the doctrine of sin central to his theology, and how MacDonald responded. Manning represents the high moral tone of Tractarianism, which considered itself ineffectual if not offensive to the morally corrupt and complacent general public.²²²

We consider Manning’s 1848 sermon, ‘The Sins That Follow Us’. Taking as his text 1 Timothy 5.24 (‘Some men’s sins are open beforehand, before going to judgement; and some men they follow after’), the Archdeacon discusses blatant sinners ‘who stand in the face of the Church, and in the sight of God, self-accused’, but is more concerned with secret sins which will only be exposed on the day of judgement. Noting briefly that the context concerns ‘the high and dangerous work of ordaining pastors for the flock of Christ’, he nevertheless insists that ‘we need not dwell on context’ on the grounds that the words ‘enunciate a great law in God’s kingdom, and describe an awful fact in the administration of His perfect justice’.²²³ In other words, there is a universal, inescapable, application.

Manning emphasises that we may be unconscious of the ‘sins that follow us’, that these may well have been committed in childhood, and that such is the *unconscious* ‘state of thou-

²²⁰ *At the Back of the North Wind* (London and Glasgow: Blackie and Son Ltd, [1930(?)]), p. 307.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²²² Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 109, n. 1.

²²³ *Sermons, Volume III*, 3rd edn (London: William Pickering, 1848), p. 73.

sands'.²²⁴ We are reminded that *we* may forget the life-long accumulation of sins that we draw in our wake, but God does not: 'our forgetfulness [cannot] blot the book of His remembrance',²²⁵ childhood sins will come back to haunt us:

As the sins of the fathers upon the children, so the sins of childhood on youth, and youth on after years. How little did we know what we were laying up for ourselves. How little did we think at that day, in the hour of our transgression: This will find me out when I am in middle life, or in my old age; though it tarry never so long, it will come at last.²²⁶

Furthermore, sin '[w]hen at its worst [...] is the least perceived', and most of it relates to 'the indulgence of particular sins in youth or childhood'. It is a theme constantly repeated: 'Our early sins of wilfulness, irreverence, self-worship, have followed us'; our present infirmities are due to 'the sins of our past life, following us in chastisement'; and on judgement day, 'Sins [one has] forgotten as never truly to repent of, shall be then gathered in array'.²²⁷

Unfortunately, the only solution offered for this unconscious alliance with evil is the oxymoronic concept of conscious repentance. It begs the inevitable question posed at the end of the sermon: having done one's best to repent, Manning asks, 'Are you so sure that you do repent?' If you answer in the affirmative:

then you have one great reason to mistrust yourself; I mean, because you are so sure. If you were less satisfied, you might be surer; because you are so sure, you have the most reason for misgiving.²²⁸

It is a message at the core of which is doubt which can never lead to assurance of forgiveness. Doubt, as we will explore, is also central to *North Wind*: the difference here is that sin is the theological foundation and focus. The justice of God is not only untempered by love, but love is missing. MacDonald describes this as 'undivine', that is, pagan.²²⁹

²²⁴ Ibid., pp. 76–77.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 79.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

²²⁷ Ibid., pp. 81, 82.

²²⁸ Ibid., pp. 88–89.

²²⁹ See page 126.

a theology which would explain all God's doings by low conceptions, low I mean for humanity even, of right, and law, and justice, then only taking refuge in the fact of the incapacity of the human understanding when its own inventions are impugned as undivine.²³⁰

In such religious schemes, he argues, 'hell is invariably the deepest truth, and the love of God is not so deep as hell. Hence, as foundations must be laid in the deepest, the system is founded in hell.' It is a theology which has negative consequences for a child's self-understanding. MacDonald explores this through the young hero of *Robert Falconer* (often considered MacDonald's most faithful self-portrait):²³¹

[T]he first article in the creed that Robert Falconer learned was, "I believe in hell." Practically, I mean, it was so; else how should it be that as often as a thought of religious duty arose in his mind, it appeared in the form of escaping hell, of fleeing from the wrath to come? For his very nature was hell, being not born in sin and brought forth in iniquity, but born sin and brought forth iniquity.²³²

In contrast, MacDonald advocates a theology based on F. D. Maurice's 'abyss of love'. While accepting that 'there is an abyss of Death, into which I may sink, and be lost,' Maurice had insisted that:

Christ's Gospel reveals an abyss of Love, below that; I am content to be lost in that. I know no more, but I am sure that there is a woe on us if we do not preach this Gospel, if we do not proclaim the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit,—the Eternal Charity.²³³

MacDonald, similarly, argues that the deepest in God is not power, 'for power could not make him what we mean when we say *God*', but love: 'In one word, God is Love. Love is the deepest depth, the essence of his nature, at the root of all his being.'²³⁴ Furthermore, the child, carrying the image of the God of love, is the beneficiary of 'original blessing' and expresses 'the deepest heart of humanity', the divine heart. The marriage of these two 'depths' is a rejection of the doctrine of original sin. For just as Jesus received the 'child in the midst':

²³⁰ *Robert Falconer*, 3 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1868), I, p. 152. These comments, aimed at Scottish Calvinism, follow the autobiographical account of MacDonald's fierce grandmother's burning of her son's violin because of its corrupting influence. (*GMAW*, p. 29; cf. note 771.)

²³¹ See, for example, *GM*, pp. 32, 37–38.

²³² *Falconer*, I, pp. 152–53.

²³³ *Theological Essays* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1853), pp. 442–43.

²³⁴ *US3*, p. 8.

when we receive the child in the name of Christ, the very childhood that we receive to our arms is humanity. We love its humanity in its childhood, for childhood is the deepest heart of humanity—its divine heart; and so in the name of the child we receive all humanity. Therefore, although the lesson is not about humanity, but about childhood, it returns upon our race, and we receive our race with wider arms and deeper heart.²³⁵

There is a fusion here of the divine and human centred on childhood, that is, the presence of the ‘child-God’ resides in ‘the deepest heart of humanity’. The child, embodying the *imago Dei* as well as the *imago hominis*, rather than being a barrier to God and cursed with original sin becomes a gateway to God and a mediator of God’s presence. It is this that MacDonald explores in *North Wind*.

3.3 A reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*

In *At the Back of the North Wind*, as in many of his narratives, MacDonald places such an innocent child—here Diamond, an androgynous, fragile, prepubescent boy—in an ambiguous world, ambiguous as both benign and hostile. ‘Mother nature’, the nurturing robe of God that is also red in tooth and claw, is played by a personified North Wind, who one moment gently caresses a flower, the next, sinks a ship. Diamond, in his innocence—that is, sinlessness and faith—simply accepts her for who she is. When, for example, North Wind warns him to trust her even if she should appear in hideous guises such as a bat, a serpent, or a tiger, she asks: ‘Do you understand?’ He simply replies: ‘Quite well’.²³⁶ This ‘insane’ naive trust is interpreted by others as just that.²³⁷ he has a ‘tile loose’, is nicknamed ‘God’s baby’, and admits himself that he ‘never can tell what they call clever from what they call silly’.²³⁸ MacDonald’s thesis in *North Wind* is expressed by Diamond’s benefactor, a Mr Raymond: ‘I suspect the child’s a genius [...] and that’s what makes people think him silly’.²³⁹ The genius of true faith, it is proposed, looks like madness to those who claim sanity.

²³⁵ *Unspoken Sermons: First Series* (London: Strahan, 1867; Eureka, CA: Sunrise, 1988), p. 16.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

²³⁷ *NW*, pp. 140–41, 174, 195, 304, 306.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 355. The boy is often called ‘silly’. MacDonald suggests that, in the archaic sense of the word (perhaps ‘innocent’ or ‘happy’) they were correct (*ibid.*, p. 356).

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

Published shortly after *The Imagination: Its Function and Culture*, *North Wind* illustrates that essay's theology.²⁴⁰ Central is the idea that imagination is the bridge to a transcendent realm which defies 'logic'. It explores the 'thin door'²⁴¹ between this world and the next, but rather than being adjacent realities, MacDonald is exploring an ontology of intersection—the entwining of 'fairyland' with the grim realities of London. The narrative explores childhood death, gender, sexuality, class, education, and social deprivation through the eyes of a child. In light of issues highlighted above, it deserves close reading.

Death is the focus. (MacDonald allows no other reading: Herodotus and Dante are referenced, and at the close of the novel, Diamond dies and goes to the 'back of the north wind'.)²⁴² There is, however, no grim reaper; instead, nature herself plays the angel of death. North Wind is a shape-shifting feminine being who to those who are 'good' appears as a beautiful woman, but may incarnate herself as a wolf to the morally depraved;²⁴³ a being of immense power but nevertheless benign.

Despite her transcendent role, North Wind is not omniscient. Her work is choreographed by an unseen higher power whose song, she says, originates 'outside this air in which I make such a storm', whose promptings she must obey, but who remains mysterious:

I am always hearing, through every noise, through all the noise I am making myself even, the sound of a far-off song. I do not exactly know where it is, or what it means.²⁴⁴

Likewise, she is unable to account for her actions: 'I have to do ten thousand things without being able to tell how'.²⁴⁵ God may be in nature but remains hidden. She, like human members of the cast, is mystified by evil and catastrophe. When Diamond asks her, on sinking the ship, how such an event is good for those drowned, she points to universal eschatological resolution:

²⁴⁰ 'A Reading of *NW*', p. 169.

²⁴¹ See page 152.

²⁴² *NW*, pp. 1, 120.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

“Somehow, I can’t say how, it [the song] tells me that all is right; that it is coming to swallow up all cries [...]. It wouldn’t be the song it seems to be if it did not swallow up all their fear and pain too, and set them singing it themselves with the rest. I am sure it will.”²⁴⁶

Although she is the doorway to the afterlife (Diamond must walk through her body to access the land behind her), she is not permitted to enter it: the north wind, MacDonald reminds us, can only blow southwards; death has no place in eternity.

3.3 (a) Methodology and style

While *North Wind* may be appreciated by children as a good yarn, MacDonald has clearly invested effort in a multi-layered narrative, a strong theme of which is doubt.²⁴⁷ Unlike the doubt of H. E. Manning, which short-circuits faith, for MacDonald, doubt is the soil in which faith grows:

A man may be haunted with doubts, and only grow thereby in faith. Doubts are the messengers of the Living One to rouse the honest. They are the first knock at our door of things that are not yet, but have to be, understood; and theirs in general is the inhospitable reception of angels that do not come in their own likeness. Doubt must precede every deeper assurance; for uncertainties are what we first see when we look into a region hitherto unknown, unexplored, unannexed.²⁴⁸

God, he argues, would rather have honest doubt than dishonest faith:

But God is assuredly pleased with those who will neither lie for him, quench their dim vision of himself, nor count *that* his mind which they would despise in a man of his making.²⁴⁹

So instead of triumphant theological certainty (MacDonald holds the view that ‘the more ignorant a man is, the more capable is he of being absolutely certain of many things—with such certainty, that is, as consists in the absence of doubt’)²⁵⁰ this narrative embodies ambiguity and uncertainty. We are forced to question notions of reality: boundaries are consistently blurred leaving the reader disorientated—forced, in fact, to exercise imagination; to find meaning in a

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

²⁴⁷ Manlove suggests that *North Wind* is unique among MacDonald’s work in ‘putting doubt at its core beside faith’ (‘A Reading of *NW*’, p. 152); however, the juxtaposition of doubt and faith recurs in MacDonald’s opus, usually distinguishing the faithful (who have honest doubt) from the faithless (who are secure in fundamentalism).

²⁴⁸ *US2*, p. 201.

²⁴⁹ *England’s Antiphon*, p. 328.

²⁵⁰ *Malcolm*, III, p. 133. (Cf. Augustine, ‘*Si comprehendis non est Deus*’.)

narrative that defies logic. MacDonald deliberately leaves questions unanswered and loose ends untied: the reader must exercise faith.

In a literary world where God and his priests were inevitably male, North Wind, a decidedly female figure, is God's prime agent in the narrative. In contrast to stereotypical female tropes such as the meek Victorian housewife, she is not only a being of immense power, but a powerfully erotic figure who frequently presses Diamond to her 'bosom', an eroticism reinforced by the sensuous woodcuts of Arthur Hughes (Figure 1). Then there is Diamond himself—is he simply trusting and naive, or is he insane?



Fig. 1: Illustrations from *At the Back of the North Wind* by Arthur Hughes²⁵¹

The first and last sentences of the book underline this uncertainty. It opens with 'I have been asked to tell you about the back of the north wind,' but—as Colin Manlove remarks—it leaves us wondering who is doing the asking.²⁵²

Childhood death was a vexing contemporary issue. It is conceivable that *North Wind* was a response to a Christmas gift book, *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes* (1865), one scene of which concerns the imminent death of a child. If not a specific response to this book, it is certainly informed by the sentiments expressed. Illustrated by the picture of a mother cradling a

²⁵¹ *NW*, pp. 373, 375. Later illustrations are significantly more modest, such as the 1988 white-robed (though heavy-breasted) figure of Luran A. Mills (*Behind the Back of the North Wind*, p. xv).

²⁵² 'A Reading of *NW*', p. 157.

dying toddler, surrounded by anxious children and an impotent doctor, the accompanying poem reads:

How trembling the children gather round, | Startled out of sleep, and scared and crying!
 'Is our merry little sister dying? | Will they come and put her underground
 As they did poor baby on that May day? | Or will shining angels stoop and take her
 On their snow-white wings to heaven, and make her | Sit among the stars, as fair as they?
 'But she'll have no mother there to kiss! | We are sorely frightened', say the children
 'Thinking of this death, so strange bewildering: | Tell us, only tell us what death is?'²⁵³

So who is the narrator? He is certainly not the standard omniscient narrator of fiction: he often ponders himself what certain things could mean, and claims ignorance of others, and yet at the same time narrates scenes which can only be the fruit of omniscience. Towards the end of the tale he confesses to having befriended Diamond and persuaded him to tell him about the back of the north wind. Perhaps Diamond is real?

When Diamond finally succumbs to death—an event full of ambiguity since he has practically invited it by leaving windows open so that North Wind can visit him—he is found lying white and cold in his room. The closing sentences of the narrator are:

I walked up the winding stair, and entered his room. A lovely figure, as white and almost as clear as alabaster, was lying on the bed. I saw at once how it was. They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind.²⁵⁴

The choice of the word 'alabaster' which is 'almost clear' is reminiscent of the broken box of perfume poured over the feet of Jesus: Diamond's life has been poured out, not only to save his friends, but as an oblation offered to the unseen eternal power behind North Wind's actions. Is he really dead? Or alive somewhere else? The narrator may be confident—'I saw at once how it was'—but the reader is left feeling unsure, wondering instead whether to side with those who 'thought he was dead'.

Ambiguity is reinforced in the way the fictional real world merges with fantasy. Early in the narrative, Diamond is whisked from his bed by North Wind, now at her most powerful, and swept across the skies of London. Having blown tiles from the roof above his bed, she 'lifted

²⁵³ 'Victorian Childhood', p. 63.

²⁵⁴ *NW*, p. 391.

him from the roof—up—up into her bosom, and held him there’,²⁵⁵ later winding him in her hair for safety. From this vantage point he watches as with her ‘great besom’ she sweeps filth from the city, the wind howling down streets and alleyways. The scene again destabilises reality as the apparent movement of the streets below is set against the stasis experienced by Diamond. Until this point the reader assumes Diamond is dreaming, but abruptly, at his request, North Wind sets him down to help a poor crossing-sweeper, Nanny, struggling with her own little besom in the rising wind. Diamond eventually has to find his own way home on foot. In another scene, Diamond hears two horses having a conversation, one of which claims to be an angel, all of which leaves the reader questioning the nature of reality.

We encounter dream narratives (from Nanny and Diamond) which include dreams within dreams and stories within the story: one chapter is devoted to the tale told by a philanthropist visiting the children’s hospital, and extended nursery rhymes also provide nested narratives. The reader is left bewildered. It has been suggested that this disorientation is because MacDonald has over-padded his narrative at the expenses of plot focus,²⁵⁶ but equally it might be read as a further destabilising device.²⁵⁷ Is peripheral material as peripheral as it seems? MacDonald is saying—‘you, the reader, must decide what is real, what is important’. John Pennington summarises:

Thus MacDonald creates a highly original and complex work that challenges the reader’s narrative assumptions, breaks them, and provides the reader with a higher reality—death—which becomes, ironically, peaceful and beautiful.²⁵⁸

North Wind is conspicuously absent from the middle third of the book as Diamond is portrayed as one living by faith fuelled by his earlier experiences. He is clearly capable of logical thought, taking very practical steps to provide for the family during his father’s illness, as well as rescuing Nanny from almost certain death in the slums. His pragmatic decisions are rational, and yet at times his reaction to external forces (such as indifference to name-calling)²⁵⁹ are

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 76.

²⁵⁶ David S. Robb, ‘Fiction for the Child’, in *Behind the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 26–32 (p. 30).

²⁵⁷ U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 229.

²⁵⁸ ‘Alice at the Back of the North Wind’, p. 58.

²⁵⁹ *NW*, pp. 304–05.

clearly irrational and not ‘normal’, at which point the narrator repeats the refrain: ‘we must not forget that he had been to the back of the north wind’. But had he? If his dream-like visit to the back of the north wind early in the narrative is indeed real, then how did he return from death?

Names are also significant. Manlove notes that alchemical symbolism is woven into the tale: that the colours black, red, and white—representing the stages of alchemical transformation from base to higher substances—are used to underscore a broad narrative of the power of imagination to transform. Thus Diamond’s father first serves a Mr and Mrs Coleman, and black storms fill the London sky paralleling the filth of the streets; then there is the enigmatic angel-horse named Ruby, and the loan of a ruby ring to Nanny while she is recovering in hospital—both red, and each representing catalytic materials triggering transformation; and finally Diamond’s white face and his alabaster, semi-translucent end indicate translation to a higher plane of existence, a fulfilment of the quest for the Philosopher’s Stone, embodying the prophetic significance of his name. Manlove suggests that such alchemical symbolism forces us to look below the ‘surface’ of London to its deeper and more ancient (and more corrupt) roots; that even the ‘obvious’ appearance of reality is deceptive.²⁶⁰

Diamond’s name is significant. Although ostensibly simply named after his father’s favourite horse, old Diamond,²⁶¹ this random act is woven into Diamond’s divinely-ordained destiny. He is not only pure white, unchangeable, and immutable despite forces ranged against him, but he reflects and refracts eternal light in a dark Victorian town; he is Diamond—a citizen of both earth and heaven²⁶²—and ultimately his light is entirely dependent on its divine source: as his earthly life wanes, his face is repeatedly described as white, until on his deathbed he is translucent alabaster. The implication is that his true nature is only fully realised after death which, in MacDonald’s theology, involves being embraced, subsumed, by the fire of God, a positive experience only for those whose hearts are diamond-pure and transparent:

The man who loves God, and is not yet pure, courts the burning of God.

[...]

²⁶⁰ ‘A Reading of *NW*’, p. 162.

²⁶¹ *NW*, p. 10.

²⁶² ‘A Reading of *NW*’, p. 172.

The man whose deeds are evil, fears the burning. But the burning will not come the less that he fears it or denies it.²⁶³

The philanthropist who visits the children in hospital and later secures the future of Nanny and Diamond and his family is Mr Raymond—‘light of the world’—though his light is suspect.²⁶⁴ He appears to derive pleasure from testing Diamond’s father to see if he is worthy of being lifted from poverty and provided with a position (a test which involves having to care for a second horse, Ruby, which turns out to be entirely unsuitable as a cab horse, and is later revealed to be an angel), and is himself incapacitated by illness for a while, revealing that his life, too, is being choreographed from elsewhere. He has, however, a certain smugness in the power that wealth brings; he may visit the children’s hospital, but most of his time is spent making money writing books for children and living comfortably in a fine house. Here again MacDonald introduces doubt: does Mr Raymond know that his horse is lazy and, moreover, an angel? Is he blind to the true nature of poverty? Is his philanthropy more about him than the poor of London?²⁶⁵ He may be the ‘light of the world,’ but which world?

This brief overview reveals a multi-layered text aimed as much at those who read *to* children as children themselves. Multiple readings have been offered,²⁶⁶ and are encouraged: ‘If [the reader] be a true man, he will imagine true things: what matter whether I meant them or not?’ As the truly artistic work employs God-given images, the author ‘cannot help his words and figures falling into such combinations in the mind of another as he had himself not foreseen’.²⁶⁷ That said, we focus here on Diamond as the embodiment of MacDonald’s theology of childlikeness.

²⁶³ *USI*, p. 46.

²⁶⁴ ‘A Reading of *NW*’, p. 161.

²⁶⁵ Knoepflemacher suggests that Raymond exemplifies the bourgeois benevolence of such as Dodgson and Ruskin, and calls into question the motives and efficacy of middle-class philanthropy (*Childland*, p. 256). This seems a more plausible reading than John Pennington’s view that Raymond—who reads to the children ‘The Little Lady and the Goblin Prince’ (an allusion to MacDonald’s forthcoming *The Princes and The Goblin*)—is MacDonald himself. (‘Alice at the Back of the North Wind’, p. 57.)

²⁶⁶ There are sixteen essays in *Behind the Back of the North Wind*.

²⁶⁷ *Orts*, p. 320.

3.3 (b) Interwoven worlds—the fictive setting

Being the son of a poor coachman, Diamond lives in the stables, and his bedroom is the hayloft immediately above his namesake. The two social worlds—the upper and lower classes—live in separate spheres, but Diamond, with his angelic face and character, is permitted on occasions to visit the house of Mr Coleman, his father's employer, or play in the garden: in this earthly realm, innocent Diamond connects these class spheres, prevenient to his role as bridge between the natural and supernatural realms.

The 'thin door'²⁶⁸ between Diamond and death is the decaying wall of the stable:

He had not the least idea that the wind got in at a chink in the wall, and blew about him all night. For the back of his bed was only of boards an inch thick, and on the other side of them was the north wind [...] in many places they were more like tinder than timber.²⁶⁹

As illustrated in *Lilith*, MacDonald is suggesting that what we consider to be a robust, hermetically-sealed, safe quotidian reality is located within the wider reality of God's 'dangerous' presence, and that, although unaware of it, the wind of God's Spirit gets in through chinks in what amount to very flimsy walls, and 'blows about us all night'. The image of Diamond's vulnerability in a cold world presages his death—the fate of 20,000 children in London annually²⁷⁰—the direct result of the coldness (that is, sin) of his father's employer, the 'black' (untransformed) Mr Coleman who is indifferent to Diamond's welfare, ignoring the need to repair the coach house, forcing his mother to paste paper over the holes.²⁷¹

The narrative challenges our notions of what is 'inside' and what is 'outside'. Diamond, surrounded by bales of hay (the image of a very temporary shelter, a manger housing this young saviour whose father's name is also Joseph)²⁷² thinks he is inside, but soon he hears North Wind whispering on the other side of the thin partition accusing the boy of blocking up her window, a knot-hole in the wood, with straw.

"What window?" asked Diamond.

²⁶⁸ Page 152.

²⁶⁹ *NW*, p. 12.

²⁷⁰ Nicholas Baldwin, 'Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children Interactive History Timeline', <http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/about-us/our-history/interactive-history-timeline/> [accessed 31 October 2103].

²⁷¹ *NW*, pp. 13–14.

²⁷² For Manlove, Diamond 'is a Victorian Christ' ('A Reading of *NW*', p. 172).

“You stuffed hay into it three times last night. I had to blow it out again three times.”

“You can’t mean this little hole! It isn’t a window; it’s a hole in my bed.”

“I did not say it was *a* window: I said it was *my* window.”

“But it can’t be a window, because windows are holes to see out of.”

“Well, that’s just what I made this window for.”

“But you are outside: you can’t want a window.”

“You are quite mistaken. Windows are to see out of, you say. Well, I’m in my house, and I want windows to see out of it.”²⁷³

For MacDonald, ‘nature’ (played by North Wind) is closer to the centre of reality than our temporary shelters; resonances with the Incarnation reinforce this reading. MacDonald conceives of reality in terms of concentric circles, placing the fire of God at the centre, the land at the back of the north wind as a purgatorial foyer, death as the doorway to that realm, and the ‘real’ Victorian world as located nearer the outer skirt of God’s presence—a dangerous realm where the gravitational pull of God is almost matched by that of evil, where God’s presence is experienced as a Behmenist dark fire, and where human choice determines trajectory. He speaks, for example, of the repentant soul’s journey towards the embrace of God, which continues—

until at length the glory of our existence flashes upon us, we face full to the sun that enlightens what it sent forth, and know ourselves alive with an infinite life, even the life of the Father; know that our existence is not the moonlight of a mere consciousness of being, but the sun-glory of a life justified by having become one with its origin, thinking and feeling with the primal Sun of life, from whom it was dropped away that it might know and bethink itself, and return to circle for ever in exultant harmony around him. Then indeed we *are*; then indeed we have life; the life of Jesus has, through light, become life in us; the glory of God in the face of Jesus, mirrored in our hearts, has made us alive; we are one with God for ever and ever.²⁷⁴

Meanwhile, this liminal outer circle of quotidian reality is punctured by ‘windows’ which allow access for divine agents and for the ‘sun-glory’ of God himself to enter human history. This text suggests that one of those windows is a child.

We note again the ambivalence towards death. Just as Diamond’s death borders on suicide, here at the beginning of the novel there is parallel uncertainty. At bedtime, Diamond runs to his hayloft, but before climbing into bed,

²⁷³ *NW*, p. 14.

²⁷⁴ *US3*, pp. 53–54.

he would creep into the heart of the hay, and lie there thinking how cold it was outside in the wind, and how warm it was inside there in his bed, and how he could go to it when he pleased, only he wouldn't just yet; he would get a little colder first.²⁷⁵

This thin, poorly-clad child appears to be inviting death, a conclusion reinforced when he deliberately opens holes in his thin wall so that the cold North Wind can enter. If death is indeed the doorway to a better realm, MacDonald is asking, why do we not desire it?

After Diamond's visit to the back of the north wind, he becomes a divine agent, significantly more effective at bringing about social change than Mr Raymond. He appears impervious to evil, which now has no purchase on his saintly soul (he has 'died, and his life is hid in Christ').²⁷⁶ While Mr Raymond tells stories to children in hospital but still lives in a fine house, Diamond is embedded in working-class squalor overcoming darkness with light. The light is not 'up there' in a Platonic spiritual realm, but embedded in quotidian reality; however, the primary way that this divine light shines is through the window of a diamond-child.

We have, then, a fluid narrative with blurred boundaries, questioning notions of reality and challenging conventional stereotypes: against this fluid background, Diamond provides the focal point. The text is thus a reverse *Bildungsroman*: rather than the protagonist changing and maturing through exposure to life experiences, Diamond is a figure of stasis who dies in the same childhood state as in chapter one. He not only represents but mediates God's 'unmoving' fire at the centre of reality. As in the narrative of *Sir Gibbie*, which we consider later, the action circles around him; it is others who change. We now consider specific theological implications of this text with particular reference to the child at its centre.

3.3 (c) Good death

First, there is a rejection of the traditional religious focus on inherent sin leading to harsh judgement. On meeting the 'angel of death' for the first time, Diamond 'was not yet frightened, for he had not yet learned to be'.²⁷⁷ innocence, not depravity, is the natural state of an uneducated ('uncultured') child, furthermore, fear of death is a false childhood emotion that has to be

²⁷⁵ *NW*, p. 11.

²⁷⁶ *Col.* 3.3.

²⁷⁷ *NW*, p. 13.

‘learned’—it is both *rational*, that is, false because unimaginative, and *irrational* since it is based on false premises. Fear of death comes from a refusal to embrace it. Early in the narrative, ‘death’ holds out her arms to the child:

“Will you go with me now, you little Diamond? I am sorry I was forced to be so rough with you,” said the lady.

“I will; yes, I will,” answered Diamond, holding out his arms.

But this intuitive embrace is checked by a rational thought: Diamond suddenly realises he is only wearing his nightgown. North Wind consoles him:

“Oh, never mind your clothes. You will not be cold. Nobody is cold with the North Wind.”

“I thought everybody was,” said Diamond.²⁷⁸

This is a direct challenge to the theology that led to the death-bed angst of children.²⁷⁹

North Wind, she observes, is known by many names which hide her true nature: ‘Evil Chance, sometimes Ruin; and they have another name [...] which they think the most dreadful of all’,²⁸⁰ but death should not be thought of as cold:

“That is a great mistake. Most people make it, however. They are cold because they are not with the North Wind, but without it.”²⁸¹

MacDonald stresses that the boy never feels the cold when he is travelling with her: held to her breast or wrapped in her hair, he is travelling at her speed, embracing her agenda; the wind is felt only when resisted. Clothes which keep out the cold are symbolic—as is the thin stable wall—of human denial of death and false comfort in material things:²⁸² the coldness is felt only by those who are ‘not with the North Wind, but without it’, and is an adult, learned response to death:

²⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 19–20.

²⁷⁹ Note 183.

²⁸⁰ *NW*, p. 377.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁸² On the other side of Diamond’s thin bedroom wall is ‘Mr. Dyves’s garden’ (ibid., p. 18), a reference, it would appear, to the rich man in Hades in Luke 16. Diamond, in contrast, is in ‘Abraham’s’ bosom.

If Diamond had been a little older, and had supposed himself a good deal wiser, he would have thought the lady was joking. But he was not older, and did not fancy himself wiser, and therefore understood her well enough. Again he stretched out his arms.²⁸³

The trusting embrace and intuitive understanding of this child with a prophetic name is contrasted with the attitude of a preacher who visits the family. The ‘man [...] was finding fault with [Diamond’s] name’ on the grounds that it was unbiblical. This half-recalled scene from Diamond’s early years was a confrontation in which, Diamond remembers, North Wind played a role:

“And the wind—you, ma’am—came in, and blew the bible out of the man’s hands, and the leaves went all flutter flutter on the floor, and my mother picked it up and gave it back to him open and there—”

“Was your name in the bible,—the sixth stone in the high-priest’s breastplate.”²⁸⁴

Aaron’s priestly attire draws attention to Diamond’s priestly role, one lost on the religious visitor, and Diamond’s embrace of death (he is never cold because ‘nobody is cold with the North Wind’) implies a deeper, intuitive understanding of biblical injunctions to lay down one’s life in contrast with the visiting preacher’s preoccupation with biblical formalities which blind him to intuitive truth.

3.3 (d) Childlike imagination and obedience

The primary childlike values illustrated here are imagination and obedience. Diamond’s practical, rational action is always imaginative, a response that is never simply driven by expediency or convention. When his father is ill, for example, and unable to drive the cab, Diamond looks after his baby sister. Although it is a while since North Wind has appeared in person (the implication being that he is physically healthy) Diamond’s faith in her remains: he amuses the baby by singing it a song which he claims ‘baby and I learned out of North Wind’s book’.²⁸⁵ The reference is to a book that he and his mother had found lying on a beach, a mysterious book left there by North Wind with its leaves fluttering in the breeze, containing rambling poems which made no sense to his mother, who simply ‘thought it might amuse him, though [...] couldn’t

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 21. The uncapitalised ‘bible’ indicates MacDonald’s aversion to ‘bibliolatry’.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 224.

find any sense in it' (rationally meaningless), but which Diamond intuitively understands (imaginatively perceived).²⁸⁶ He claims the poems remind him of the land at the back of the North Wind, at which point his 'mother was frightened, for she thought the fever was coming on again'.²⁸⁷ The books—the dropped Bible and North Wind's mysterious volume—imply that both the scriptures and nature may only be read truly when their leaves are fluttered by imaginative spiritual discernment—the wind of the Spirit that 'blows where it will'.²⁸⁸

So here, in the squalid London lodging, Diamond recites a long poem ('for he had a wonderful memory')²⁸⁹ about the early bird which catches a worm. The next morning, the diminutive child somehow manages to harness old Diamond and make a significant amount of money driving (without permission) his father's cab. The message is that rational action (in this case somewhat dangerous and naive) is 'sensible'—it requires imaginative understanding of North Wind's will, a will that is 'hidden [...] from the wise and prudent' and 'revealed [...] to babes'.²⁹⁰

In these middle chapters, as Diamond responds to his family's declining health and wealth, he repeatedly takes risks: he drives the cab to a remote and dangerous area of London where he is surrounded by a street gang; he walks alone into the dangerous slum to rescue Nanny, despite being warned off by a policeman; intervenes in a case of domestic abuse, and so on. In each case the reader is tempted to side with those who consider him insane, and yet in every case he experiences miraculous preservation and makes a positive impact on his world. This is in marked contrast to those such as Mr Coleman who is financially ruined when North Wind sinks the ship in which he had unwisely invested all his capital.

Diamond, the perfect child, is imaginative and obedient with a trust that precedes or overrides risk-assessment. His actions *are* illogical, naive and unwise, but MacDonald insists that North Wind (God) protects those who thus trust her. He is dramatizing Paul's claim that 'the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men', and that

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 145.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 151.

²⁸⁸ Jn 3.8.

²⁸⁹ *NW*, p. 224.

²⁹⁰ Lk. 10.21, see page 128.

‘the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God’; and, as illustrated by the financial ruin of Mr Coleman, that ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness.’²⁹¹ But is this merely a naive optimism? (MacDonald would have been aware of child mortality rates in the growing industrial towns, and was predeceased by five of his own children.) Certainly here, as elsewhere, God’s perfect protection of the perfect child is implied, but I suggest that primarily MacDonald is asking: If death is essentially benign, why do we fear it? Is it not better to take risks and die than ‘save your life and lose it’?²⁹² As he remarks elsewhere:

Happy he who, as his sun is going down behind the western, is himself ascending the eastern hill, *returning through old age to the second and better childhood* which shall not be taken from him. For he who turns his back on the setting sun goes to meet the rising sun; and he who loses his life shall find it.²⁹³

The message is that the transcendent realm, and the will of God, can only be perceived imaginatively since it lies beyond the world of convention; that only those with a childlike, trusting heart, who choose to walk in obedience despite the checks of rationality, have the privilege of walking without fear through the door of death. This message is reinforced as the narrative draws to a close. We find Nanny and her friend Jim, rescued street children, living in Mr Raymond’s country residence with Diamond and his family. The house, called The Mound, rises above the surrounding countryside like a newly-dug grave, implying that even Mr Raymond’s philanthropy cannot insulate him from death—in this case not a death to be embraced, as evidenced by Diamond’s face which is increasingly beatified as his days grow short, but a vain attempt to stave off the fearful death resulting from trusting in money rather than North Wind. Death comes to us all: how we experience it depends on our ability to be imaginative.

This is illustrated in the contrast between Diamond and his old street colleagues. Now growing, and secure in their new-found haven, the latter frequently say that Diamond is ‘silly’ and has a ‘tile loose’. Whereas earlier in their relationship there were signs of empathy, distance is now growing; although still children, they are growing into dull, rationalist adults. This ra-

²⁹¹ 1 Cor. 1.25 and 3.19.

²⁹² Lk. 17.33, cf. Matt. 10.39, 16.25; Mk. 8.35; Lk. 9.24; Jn 12.25.

²⁹³ *Donal Grant*, p. 9 (emphasis mine). A scene captured by Arthur Hughes’s *The Knight of the Sun*, the knight being MacDonald. (Helen Sutherland, ‘George MacDonald and the Visual Arts’ in *Rethinking George MacDonald*, ed. by Christopher MacLachlan *et al.* (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2013), p. 216.)

tionalism is expressed as an inability to ‘read’ nature and a fear of death. Nanny, talking to Diamond, expresses ‘her opinion of the country’:

“There ain’t nothing in it but the sun and moon, Diamond.”

“There’s trees and flowers,” said Diamond.

“Well, they ain’t no count,” returned Nanny.

“Ain’t they? They’re so beautiful, they make you happy to look at them.”

“That’s because you’re such a silly.”²⁹⁴

The silliness here is clearly Nanny’s, not Diamond’s. Her and Jim’s inability to imaginatively connect with ‘transcendent’ nature results in a fear of death. Thus when a violent thunderstorm engulfs the children, the narrator (now present in the tale) reports that ‘Nanny and Jim came running up to us, pale with fear. Diamond’s face too was paler than usual, but with delight. Some of the glory [of the lightning] seemed to have clung to it, and remained shining.’ The transcendent lightning, while evoking fear in Nanny and Jim, has the opposite effect on Diamond:

“You’re not frightened—are you, Diamond?” I said.

“No. Why should I be?” he answered with his usual question, looking up in my face with calm shining eyes.

“He ain’t got sense to be frightened,” said Nanny, going up to him and giving him a pitying hug.²⁹⁵

Nanny’s response here reminds us that fear is ‘unnatural’ and has to be learned. In contrast to her fear, the ‘glory’ that clings to Diamond’s face is encroaching death brought on by the soaking, a glory that grows until he eventually succumbs to a peaceful death in his attic room.

As the narrative closes, Diamond appears increasingly divorced from quotidian reality: now that his practical ministrations are over, he has become an appendage, a child who does not need education (since he is now a page boy in the house) and who is increasingly called ‘silly’. ‘Mr. Raymond advised his father to give him plenty of liberty’²⁹⁶ and soon we find him ‘dressed in a suit of blue, from which his pale face and fair hair came out like the loveliest blossom’.²⁹⁷ His duties in the house are merely nominal, and often, ‘Mrs. Raymond confessed that she often

²⁹⁴ *NW*, p. 347.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 363–64.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

rang her bell just to have once more the pleasure of seeing the lovely stillness of the boy's face, with those blue eyes which', acting as windows to transcendence, 'seemed rather made for other people to look into than for himself to look out of.' Even his old friends Nanny and Jim 'appeared to regard him as a mere toy, except when they found he could minister to the increase of their privileges or indulgences, when they made no scruple of using him—generally with success'.²⁹⁸

We have here a child who has outlived his usefulness in the eyes of those he is closest to. He is now a toy, kept for decoration and amusement. At the beginning of his life he is considered 'simple' and given little to do except babysitting, now—after a short productive season of provision for his family—he once again finds himself unemployed since those around him consider him unemployable. Keeping a child as a 'toy' dressed in finery was a growing trend in Victorian middle class society, but MacDonald here is painting a picture of a child who is too good for this world and will *never* fit into a conventional role: his true destiny lies beyond death.²⁹⁹

3.3 (e) The implications of MacDonald's portrayal of childhood imagination and obedience

Alan Yui's pronouncement that there are 'no children in Wordsworth's poetry' is, in a sense, trivial since no fictive child is 'real'.³⁰⁰ The next chapter explores this further. Here we simply note that characters such as Nanny and Jim (the rescued street children) appear more real than Diamond. Their cynicism and worldly wisdom resonates with our experience of real children and contrasts with the 'unreal' sentimentality of Diamond, but no character is 'real'. These are symbols used to challenge, rather than confirm, conceptions of reality. As we look 'through' this artwork we find ourselves looking at Diamond's fictive world through his eyes. We are then drawn to view our world as an artwork which mediates divine truth, with sight suspicious of the prescriptive pretensions of 'adulthood'. Diamond, furthermore, embodies those mental states—a child mind prone to insanity and dreams—most feared by adult Victorians as they were inher-

²⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 359.

²⁹⁹ For Lisa Hermine Makman, *North Wind* 'presents the new toy-child but, strikingly, replays in its narrative the progressive development of the fantasy that children are toys' ('Child's Work is Child's Play: The Value of George MacDonald's Diamond', in *Behind the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 109–27 (p. 109)). I suggest it is a critique rather than a replay.

³⁰⁰ Note 160.

ently *unknowable*, beyond both rationalisation and control.³⁰¹ This text proposes that it is ‘adult’ certainty that is illusory rather than the ‘insanity’ and dreams of childhood, and thus doubt is to be welcomed since it precipitates fresh vision. The reader must decide whether, and on what grounds, the immediate, ‘irrational’ obedience exemplified by Diamond is reasonable or advisable. Is Christian faith ‘reasonable or advisable’? MacDonald is dramatizing fundamental theological questions concerning the essential unknowability of God, the shortcomings of human logic, the problem of evil, and the imprecision of human cognition. There is, nevertheless (as in all of MacDonald’s work), profound optimism interwoven with profound doubt—a phrase which might summarise Christian faith.

Is Diamond’s irrational obedience reasonable? To accuse him of irrationality (or insanity) is to side with those who call him ‘God’s baby’, an accusation which MacDonald makes clear is the result of spiritual insensitivity and an inability to perceive the wider picture. Those who think they are wise, such as Mr Raymond who hides from social issues on his own little island, The Mound, which ‘stood upon a little steep knoll, so smooth and symmetrical that it showed itself at once to be *artificial*’,³⁰² are the ones who are irrational and live in ‘graves’. Diamond is not irrational, but rationalises from a different starting point: he processes data perceived imaginatively because he accepts that he *is* God’s baby. To illuminate this, we turn to *The Imagination, Its Function and Its Culture*, a work which takes the opposite view to those such as John Haslam who saw the goal of education as subjugating the passions³⁰³ and one which we need to consider before returning to Diamond.

Victorian society was bent on educating those fit to be productive. Dickens, in *Dombey and Son*, for example, denounces the educational ‘forcing apparatus’ that crammed children prematurely full of facts.³⁰⁴ MacDonald agrees, for after advising a liberal regime for Diamond,

³⁰¹ See above and also *Rethinking GM*, p. 151.

³⁰² *NW*, p. 352, emphasis mine.

³⁰³ See note 169.

³⁰⁴ Dombey senior, not interested in his child except as the future ‘& Son’, dispatches him to a ‘school’ whose mistress was ‘quite scientific in her knowledge of the childish character’. Her method was ‘not to encourage a child’s mind to develop and expand itself like a young flower, but to open it by force like an oyster’ (*Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son* (London: Oldhams Press Limited, [1930(?)]), pp. 100, 102). Discussed in *Mind of the Child*, ch. 6.

Mr Raymond remarks, ‘A boy like that [...] ought not to be pushed.’³⁰⁵ ‘Pushing’ is done by those who value factual education at the expense of imaginative development, who say:

“Are there not facts? [...] Why forsake them for fancies? Is there not that which may be *known*? Why forsake it for inventions? What God hath made, into that let man inquire.”

To which he responds:

We answer: To inquire into what God has made is the main function of the imagination. It is aroused by facts, is nourished by facts; seeks for higher and yet higher laws in those facts; but refuses to regard science as the sole interpreter of nature, or the laws of science as the only region of discovery.³⁰⁶

MacDonald is not rejecting rational thought, simply, as he remarks elsewhere, that ‘[f]act at best is but a garment of truth, which has ten thousand changes of raiment woven in the same loom’.³⁰⁷ After affirming in Coleridgean terms that human imagination is ‘that faculty in man which is likest to the prime operation of the power of God’, MacDonald identifies the main ontological problem with which *North Wind* is concerned:

We must not forget, however, that between creator and poet lies the one unpassable gulf which distinguishes—far be it from us to say *divides*—all that is God’s from all that is man’s; a gulf teeming with infinite revelations, but a gulf over which no man can pass to find out God, although God needs not to pass over it to find man; the gulf between that which calls, and that which is thus called into being; between that which makes in its own image and that which is made in that image.³⁰⁸

Put simply, God may be ‘beyond’ reason, but not beyond discovery: there are ‘infinite revelations’ in nature. However, another kind of cognition is needed; creation should be viewed as an artwork:

[God] begins with the building of the stage itself, and that stage is a world [...]. He makes the actors, and they do not act,—they *are* their part. He utters them into the visible to work out their life—his drama. When he would have an epic, he sends a thinking hero into his drama, and the epic is the soliloquy of his Hamlet.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ *NW*, p. 351.

³⁰⁶ *Orts*, p. 2.

³⁰⁷ *What’s Mine’s Mine*, 3 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1886), I, p. 69.

³⁰⁸ *Orts*, p. 2.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

In this theatrical analogy, MacDonald is emphasising that '[God's] imagination is one with his creative will. The thing that God imagines, that thing exists',³¹⁰ 'God's fiction [...] is man's reality'.³¹¹

As the thoughts move in the mind of a man, so move the worlds of men and women in the mind of God, and make no confusion there, for there they had their birth, the offspring of his imagination. Man is but a thought of God. [...] Indeed, a man is rather *being thought* than *thinking*.³¹²

This Novalis-like vision of God's 'dream' being human reality is central to MacDonald's idealist ontology and is predicated on the necessary condition that God is the *source* of all things, and thus the creative energy—as electric current through a diode—may only flow in one direction: 'a gulf over which no man can pass to find out God, although God needs not to pass over it to find man'. The obstacle to knowing God directly is that the gulf between humanity and God is 'teeming with infinite revelations' which the finite mind will never fully grasp, not only because the object of enquiry is infinite, but because the human mind has its source in that 'object'—the divine mind.

Since God is thinking into being his 'stage', to know God one must read nature using the God-given imagination, for 'God has made the world that it should thus serve his creature, developing in the service that imagination whose necessity it meets'.³¹³ Anticipating objections that human imagination is peripheral to cognition, he observes:

if [imagination] be to man what creation is to God, we must expect to find it operative in every sphere of human activity. Such is, indeed, the fact, and that to a far greater extent than is commonly supposed.³¹⁴

But are not our God-given *intellectual* abilities best suited to investigate creation (the Deist position)? MacDonald responds by arguing that it is more reasonable to expect the imagination of God to partner directly with human imagination rather than condescend to work with its lesser correlate, human intellect: 'The work of the Higher must be discovered by the search of

³¹⁰ *US3*, p. 24.

³¹¹ 'The Fantastic Imagination', in *Orts*, p. 223.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the Lower in degree which is yet similar in kind.’ However, he concludes by echoing the sentiment expressed in the *Cambridge University Magazine* for a more holistic approach to cognition.³¹⁵ ‘Intellect’ must not be ignored; it must, however, be led by imagination:

Let us not be supposed to exclude the intellect from a share in every highest office. Man is not divided when the manifestations of his life are distinguished. The intellect “is all in every part.” There were no imagination without intellect, however much it may appear that intellect can exist without imagination. *What we mean to insist upon is, that in finding out the works of God, the Intellect must labour, workman-like, under the direction of the architect, Imagination.*

Returning to Diamond, he is imaginative but we cannot accuse him of irrationality. He simply rationalises from an imaginative perspective which is incomprehensible to most of his contemporaries, a perspective that refuses to conform to convention, whether social or linguistic.³¹⁶

We return to the fundamental question: Is Diamond’s irrational obedience reasonable?

The answer must be affirmative if we accept MacDonald’s ‘ontology of imagination’ for, as an *ideal* child, Diamond’s imagination is perfect, a pure reflection of its source. His apparently naive confidence has a divine foundation. Thus when, defying rational logic, he decides to rescue Nanny from certain death in a most undesirable part of London and is surrounded by attackers, he is unsurprised when the policeman who had warned him not to carry out his quest becomes his rescuer:

“You had better have let me come with you, little man,” he said, looking down in Diamond’s face, which was flushed with his resistance.

“You came just in the right time, thank you,” returned Diamond. “They’ve done me no harm.”

“They would have if I hadn’t been at hand, though.”

“Yes; but you were at hand, you know, so they couldn’t.”

Perhaps the answer was deeper in purport than either Diamond or the policeman knew.³¹⁷

Diamond’s unquestioning obedience to imaginatively perceived divine cues, if taken to its logical conclusion, means that whatever happens he is in the hands of God, an omniscient

³¹⁵ See page 38.

³¹⁶ Diamond’s communication problems are discussed from a linguistic perspective by Ally Crockford (*Rethinking GM*, p. 150).

³¹⁷ *NW*, pp. 215-16.

and sovereign God who foresees and protects those who are obedient. It is a theme repeated throughout the narrative as Diamond experiences one ‘coincidence’ after another.

3.3 (f) Three immediate objections to this conclusion

At this point we will consider three objections to this conclusion, with particular attention to the third, since this sheds light on MacDonald’s ontology and methodology.

The first and most trivial objection is that humans are *not* ideal. Recognising this, this text must be read as an encouragement to live more imaginatively rather than as a demand for unquestioning obedience to perceived truth. While it could be argued that MacDonald has underplayed the need for rational skills in *North Wind*, this does not detract from the core message that obedience is the main requirement of those who claim faith. Faith cannot remain merely theoretical.

A second, less trivial objection concerns the genuineness of human free will. Does the policeman incident simply reflect an omniscient God’s foreknowledge, or does God ‘pre-programme’ the destiny of individuals? There is a paradox in that MacDonald’s emphasis on the need for individual perception of truth (that the role of art, including God’s artwork nature, is to awaken rather than impart meaning) is nevertheless championing a theology that suggests that such truth is defined in terms of God’s unique will for that individual, unaffected by individual action. (This is not to say that individual action is inconsequential; on the contrary, *North Wind*’s core message is that there are very negative life outcomes for those who choose to ignore God’s will for their life, but such negative outcomes are indicative of ‘kicking against the goads’ of a predetermined life trajectory which does not, apparently, modify God’s pre-ordained will or ‘truth’ for that person.) One answer might be to remind ourselves that on the divine side of the ‘gulf’ is a God ‘teeming with infinite revelations’—that the individual trajectory towards God has infinite possibility, but this does not address the issue of divine micro-management. While MacDonald is rejecting simplistic predeterminism, it would appear from this narrative that the will of a sovereign and omniscient God is nevertheless inexorable and that the best course of human response is to discern and obey. How God relates to God’s creation and God’s creatures leads us to a third question which will also shed light on this one.

The third objection concerns the validity of MacDonald's thought experiment. He is asking: What happens if we place a sinless ideal child in a fallen world? This concept is doubly flawed. First, to be human is to be born into an 'impure' environment, the word preferred by David Kelsey to describe our proximate context, and that the 'processing' of impurity—how one deals with it—is part of what it means to be fully human. However, such 'processing' cannot be considered simply a reaction to *external* stimuli: it necessarily involves dealing with *internal* impurity consequent upon being embedded in an impure quotidian environment. Just as Diamond is androgynous, one could argue he is also morally questionable in having a pre-Edenic innocence which is no longer an option for those born into the real world. David Kelsey argues at length that the quotidian environment is 'distorted', evil and sinful, noting that whereas sin has to do with wilful, culpable human behaviour (moral distortion is not the normative state of God's good creation), the former may simply result from the finitude of a universe with limited resources: what we *call* 'evil' may have its source in God who has chosen to work in a creation which is finite.³¹⁸ While MacDonald would counter this objection by insisting that the sector of reality in which we live is merely a moment in God's infinite being, a being to which we have full access, the reality is—and this is fully recognised by him—that to all practical intents and purposes our quotidian world appears finite to us. If MacDonald did not support this view he would be less fixated on escape, through death, to another realm. In other words, the pressure from a finite and impure external world means that even Diamond's perfect response to divine cues may have evil consequences.

Furthermore, from the 'internal' perspective, a pre-Edenic child is an impossibility: 'impurity' is intrinsic to human nature because of its embeddedness in a distorted world. So while MacDonald might try to distinguish between 'being born *in* sin and brought forth in iniquity' and 'being born sin and brought forth iniquity',³¹⁹ the distinction is not as black-and-white as he imagines but speaks more of theological focus as exemplified by the contrast between Maurice

³¹⁸ Not all 'natural' evil should be named evil for God created it, for example the food chain. See *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 207.

³¹⁹ *Falconer*, I, p. 153 (see page 52).

and Manning. It calls into question MacDonald's supposition that to be made in the image of God necessarily implies inherent goodness.

We may conclude, with Kelsey, that—as biblical Wisdom literature emphasises—the normal everyday human being is normative of God's creation, not some ideal future superman (or past state of perfection). Kelsey summarises thus:

The real human person is God's good creature precisely in his or her quotidian everydayness and finitude, and not because they satisfy some one, universally applicable, ideal of a human person completely—that is, “perfectly,” actualized in all respects. The status of “real” human person is not constituted by transcending the quotidian, any more than it is a degraded (i.e. “fallen”) version of a historically once or future human perfection.³²⁰

This is not to say that moral degradation (sin) is normative of God's creatures. Rather, the objection here is that MacDonald, in his attempt to create the ideal child, has created a child which is *not* ideal since it lacks a fundamental aspect of human nature which would make it fully human. He has, it could be argued, broken his own guidelines on moral congruence for in creating a fantasy world he has forgotten that when it comes to morality, the writer ‘must obey—and take [moral] laws with him into his invented world as well’.³²¹

A second aspect of this third objection concerns Diamond's premature, prepubescent death. Having never reached the age of majority, and therefore not in the eyes of society morally accountable, Diamond has never had to deal with adult issues. One must ask, therefore, whether he is in any sense *ideal*, except as an artistic device.

3.3 (g) Un-idealising the child

In this discussion of MacDonald's contribution to the evolution of childhood, we may not leave this text without considering other children portrayed here who, ironically, serve to undermine the Victorian idealisation of the child, particularly with regard to sexuality. There is an inherent dualism within *North Wind* in that, set against the idealised child Diamond, there are ‘real’ children such as Nanny and Jim, as well as comments about childhood, which help us to form a

³²⁰ *EE*, p. 207.

³²¹ ‘The Fantastic Imagination’, in *Orts*, p. 316.

more holistic picture of MacDonald's views and therefore throw light on his concept of child-likeness.

'Cripple Jim' is an abused child whose 'mother broke his leg when he wur a kid'.³²² Crossing-sweeper Nanny is taken with Jim early in the tale: 'I love Jim dearly,' she says, 'I always keeps off a penny for Jim—leastways as often as I can',³²³ and observes that 'Jim was very fond of looking at the man in the moon'³²⁴—he is drawn towards transcendence and imagination³²⁵ and understandably, as a disabled and abused slum-dweller, is longing for escape. As Nanny is drawn closer to Jim she distances herself from Diamond; eventually the pair of them grow more and more critical, 'often [saying] to each other that Diamond had a tile loose.'³²⁶ Jim only speaks four words in the narrative. During the thunder storm, as Diamond exults in the transcendent experience, Jim comments about the lightning:

"It might kill you," said Jim.

"Oh, no, it mightn't!" said Diamond.³²⁷

The gravitational pull of nature in the form of the moon—offering escape from poverty, disability, and 'artificiality'—is now ignored. Jim is visionless and earth-bound, and, despite being surrounded by nature in his country lodgings with Mr Raymond, can only be factual about lightning, and, it seems, under the thumb of Nanny, who elects herself spokesperson for the pair. MacDonald is suggesting that environment is of less consequence than orientation (Jim's entrancement with the moon begins in a slum); that Jim's choice to side with Nanny and focus entirely on quotidian reality has robbed him of transcendent vision. And Nanny, whose first address in a squalid slum was 'Paradise Row [...] next door to the Adam and Eve'³²⁸ is, despite the improvement in her lot, still living in a fallen state 'next door to Adam and Eve'. In her

³²² *NW*, p. 197.

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

³²⁵ See note 349.

³²⁶ *NW*, p. 358.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

eyes, ‘Jim was a *reasonable* being, Diamond [...] at best only an amiable, over-grown baby, whom no amount of expostulation would ever bring to talk sense, not to say think it.’³²⁹

In Nanny and Jim we have a foil for Diamond’s goodness, demonstrating that childlikeness is not always an attribute of children.

We noted earlier the Victorian fear of childhood sexuality. Perhaps Diamond exemplifies Plotz’s Child, a splendid being ‘unmarked by time, place, class or gender’ typical of male-authored fantasy literature.³³⁰ Perhaps he reflects, as Helen Sutherland suggests, the Pre-Raphaelite practice of deliberately painting androgynous other-worldly figures with ambiguous expression to underline their ideality. Burne-Jones, for example, remarks:

I mean by a picture a beautiful, romantic dream of something that never was, never will be—in a light better than any light that ever shone—in a land no one can define or remember, only desire—and the forms are divinely beautiful.³³¹

Both views might apply to Diamond, but does this mean that MacDonald is uncritical of contemporary attitudes to real children?

It is clear from *North Wind* and other texts that sexuality is never far from the surface in MacDonald’s work. In *The Light Princess*, for example, the prototype of the story of *Little Daylight* in *North Wind*,³³² the princess is cursed with weightlessness and may only experience gravity when swimming; she swims at night, and one night a prince comes upon her naked form in the water:

He soon reached the white object, and found that it was a woman. There was not enough light to show that she was a princess, but quite enough to show that she was a lady, for it does not want much light to see that.³³³

Ruskin objected, prior to publication, that it would ‘not do for the public in its present form’ on the grounds that it was ‘too amorous throughout’.³³⁴

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 346 (emphasis mine).

³³⁰ See page 36.

³³¹ Helen Sutherland notes that MacDonald was acquainted with the Burne-Jones family and had an intimate working relationship with Arthur Hughes who so successfully captured the spirit of *North Wind*. (*Rethinking GM*, p. 222.)

³³² *The Light Princess* appeared first in the novel *Adela Cathcart* (1864).

³³³ *Complete Fairy Tales* (Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 32.

³³⁴ Letter, ‘John Ruskin to GMD, July 22, 1863’, King’s College London archives, GB0100 KCLCA K/PP82, 1/1/27.

Victorian middle class adult male attitudes to children and sexuality are, certainly to post-Freudian eyes, questionable. Ruskin was infatuated with the sixteen-year-old Rose La Touche, his ‘mouse pet’, an infatuation that the MacDonalds ‘were a little troubled about’,³³⁵ and Charles Dodgson’s correspondence with the MacDonald family consists mainly of letters to his daughters,³³⁶ and he frequently took Mary, then ten, to the theatre in London.³³⁷ It is tempting to read Diamond’s prepubescent state as avoiding the need to confront the disturbing implications of sexual awareness. Sally Shuttleworth would probably agree, noting that the Victorian focus on childhood innocence exhibited an ambivalence marked by a paranoia that the opposite might indeed be the case:

Was childhood, for the Victorians, less an entity or experience in itself than a gloriously empty space, defined pre-eminently by the fact that it did not partake of the sexual feelings which complicated puberty and adult life? Ideas of childhood innocence gained their hold precisely due to equally powerful, underlying fears that the very reverse might be true.³³⁸

This ambivalence is expressed in *North Wind*.

Despite Diamond’s asexuality, there is, as noted, strong eroticism in his encounters with North Wind. Although portrayed as innocent and maternal, the strength of the imagery implies something deeper. At the beginning of the storm scene, North Wind lifts him from the roof ‘into her bosom [...] like an inconsolable child’. He clearly finds consolation as he ‘nestl[es] closer to her grand bosom’.³³⁹ Soon he is laughing, ‘leaning against her bosom’³⁴⁰ while the storm around rages:

But so sheltered was he by North Wind’s arm and bosom that only at times, in the fiercer onslaught of some curl-billowed eddy, did he recognise for a moment how wild was the storm in which he was carried, nestling in its very core and formative centre.³⁴¹

³³⁵ *GMAW*, p. 333.

³³⁶ In the two volumes of ‘Carroll’s’ letters (ed. by Morton N. Cohen (London: Macmillan, 1979)) there are none addressed to George but many to Louisa and the girls.

³³⁷ *Letters GM*, p. 264.

³³⁸ *Mind of the Child*, p. 195.

³³⁹ *NW*, p. 76.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Here he is at the ‘core and formative centre’ of ‘mother nature’, and after a brief weaning they are reunited: ‘Diamond nestled to her, and murmured into her bosom,—“Why did you leave me, dear North Wind?”’.³⁴²

For U. C. Knoepfelmacher, this is clear evidence that MacDonald has never fully reconciled himself to being prematurely weaned,³⁴³ but, perhaps more significantly and certainly more positively, a firm rejection of the ‘hideous emblems of maternity’ found in the *Alice* books, and the gynophobia implied by the all-male cast of Ruskin’s *King of the Golden River*.³⁴⁴ Whereas Ruskin and his peers preferred female passivity, MacDonald’s celebration of female sexual power may be read as a rebuttal of the gynophobia of Carroll and Ruskin and of the middle class attitudes that they represented. This is most strikingly revealed in the short story *Little Daylight* (Chapter XXVIII) which Mr Raymond tries out on the children of (presumably) Great Ormond Street, a story freighted with sexual meaning.

Mr Raymond, whose somewhat remote philanthropy is eclipsed by his desire to make money as a children’s author, reads his new ‘fairy story’ to the sick children, perhaps motivated by market research more than compassion.³⁴⁵ Prefacing the chapter with the comment ‘I do not know how much of Mr. Raymond’s story the smaller children understood’, the story is a re-working of *The Light Princess*, and concerns a beautiful princess ‘with the sunniest hair and the loveliest eyes of heavenly blue’ who has been cursed by a bad fairy to wake only at night; the curse will only be broken when she is kissed by a prince. Her beauty waxes and wanes with the phases of the moon. Contrasted with her beauty, ‘so much more painful and sad was the change as her bad time came on. The more beautiful she was in the full moon, the more withered and worn did she become as the moon waned.’ A voyeuristic prince, who comes upon the radiant girl dancing in the full moon, is entranced by her beauty, but in the power of her ‘waxing’ state, she despises his approaches and he is left to wander the forest, disconsolate. One moonless night he stumbles upon an old hag, moaning in the darkness. He finds her repulsive, but, fearing she is

³⁴² Ibid., pp. 88–89.

³⁴³ *Childland*, p. 241, c.f. p. 122.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 230–31.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 258.

about to die, instinctively kisses her, at which point she is resurrected as the beautiful princess, now free from the curse.

Mr Raymond, an amalgam of Ruskin and Carroll,³⁴⁶ is telling a tale which reveals his (and therefore their) revulsion of menstrual women, an aversion which must be overcome and which ‘repudiates the hankering for ever-pure little girls harboured by his two fellow-fantasists’³⁴⁷ or the reduction of femininity to ‘aestheticized female shapes gazed from afar’. Knoepfmacher further observes that:

Princess Daylight’s story has much to do with Lewis Carroll’s wishful constructions of perennially young dream-children and with Ruskin’s confession to MacDonald about the shattering discovery that Effie Gray had become a menstrual woman.³⁴⁸

This thinly-coded critique of contemporary attitudes to menstrual women,³⁴⁹ with its implied criticism of those such as Dodgson who preferred the company of MacDonald’s ten-year-old daughter to adult females³⁵⁰ set within a narrative which portrays divine power as primarily female, erotic, and anything but passive, throws light on the character of Diamond and MacDonald’s conception of childhood. If nothing else, MacDonald cannot be accused of turning a

³⁴⁶ Knoepfmacher insists on this correspondence as evidenced by the close personal friendship between them and the borrowed motifs found in their respective children’s stories. (Ibid., pp. 231, 262.)

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 262.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 266.

³⁴⁹ Colin Manlove suggests that *Little Daylight* is primarily concerned with imagination, and that ‘night and moon’ are ‘symbols of the imagination’ (‘A Reading of *NW*’, p. 169), however Knoepfmacher’s reading seems more plausible: it is difficult to read it otherwise when, apart from monthly cycles, there is also a reference to the ‘flow of the tide of life’ followed by the observation that ‘there was no chance of the prince wishing to kiss the princess during that period’ (*NW*, pp. 274, 288).

³⁵⁰ Dodgson’s flirting with young girls continued throughout his life. In 1863 he photographed himself surrounded by three of MacDonald’s daughters (with Greville to one side) with Mrs MacDonald kneeling to one side, glaring at the camera (*Childland*, p. 161; *GMAW*, p. 344), and his regular visits to the MacDonald household, judging by the bias of the correspondence (note 336), appear motivated more by female attraction than philosophical discourse. ‘Canon and Mrs. Liddell were understandably disturbed by the lavish attentions paid to their stunningly beautiful daughters’, and, at the age of sixty, he was boasting of having ‘girl-friends to brighten, one at a time, my lonely life by the sea: all ages from 10 to 24’ (*Childland*, pp. 157–58). Ruskin was similarly preoccupied. The obsession with Rose La Touche was preceded by the equally fated marriage with the twenty-year-old Effie Gray, a marriage annulled for his failure to consummate it. In 1864 he wrote jokingly to MacDonald: I ‘can’t bear boys’, expressing a preference for girls, of whom he has four who ‘don’t expect me to teach them the catechism’ (‘From J. Ruskin to G. MacD, April 13, 1864’, King’s College London archives, GB0100 KCLCA K/PP82, 1/1/28). In Greville’s hagiography of his father, the gloss given to Ruskin’s flawed relationship with Rose is remarkable for its apparent wilful disregard of his father’s concerns. He considers it wholly unsurprising, for example, that a man with Ruskin’s ‘normal creative vitality’, ‘love of children’, and ‘adoration of women’ should reject the Christian faith on the grounds that it was that faith which had denied him access to Rose. ‘It is small wonder’, writes Greville, ‘that he cannot conform to the creeds that deny the divinity of those gifts.’ Even more remarkably, Greville sees this as an example of ‘the tyranny of worldly wisdom which [his] father had set himself to oppose’ (*GMAW*, pp. 336–37); and on the annulment: ‘The story reflects nothing but honour upon Ruskin—unless he lied to my father, or my father to me—one supposition as utterly incredible as the other’ (ibid., p. 331). See also *Childland*, p. 139, n. 29.

blind eye to puberty, with the implication that Diamond's asexuality is not a disapprobation of sexuality, but a conscious literary choice.

What are the implications for MacDonald's contribution to the concept of childhood and attitudes to children?

The erotic relationship between North Wind and Diamond can be read as a plea for a more tolerant attitude towards childhood sexuality, and that growing sexual awareness in the prepubescent child is divine rather than demonic. Theologically it is a rejection of crude conceptions of original sin that equate the Fall with sexual activity.³⁵¹ This is most evident in *The Light Princess*, which concerns a princess cursed with weightlessness and therefore unable to 'fall'. She is also unable to cry, with a 'pre-Fall' shallow personality having never had to face moral choice, and is, by implication, on the verge of puberty and therefore not yet an adult. In this tale, MacDonald makes much of her nocturnal liaisons with the prince who, as he embraces her (implied) naked body, enables her to 'fall' into the lake where they swim together. In Romantic symbolism, water was associated with femininity, and MacDonald is clearly equating her fall into the lake with growing sexual awareness, if not union (a fact not lost on Ruskin, precipitating his objections), but what is missing is any negative judgment from MacDonald; rather the opposite as he equates growing sexual awareness with the couple's increasing joy and maturity. The negative judgment is reserved for the princess's parents, the king and queen, who despite their maturity are portrayed as sexually naive (at the beginning of the tale the king asks his wife for a child, apparently unaware of his role in the matter) and unconnected with reality. The narrative thus challenges the common Victorian equation of sex with sin.³⁵² It may, however, also indicate a wider rejection of Victorian assumptions about the child-mind: that the mystery of the child-mind should be equated with the mystery of divinity rather than with incipient insanity or hidden evil. It also stresses that God is not male.

Little Daylight is a plea for the re-evaluation of male attitudes to femininity, no doubt fuelled by the attentions paid by Dodgson to MacDonald's own daughters. Of particular note is

³⁵¹ Note 1186.

³⁵² *Childland*, p. 138.

the appearance of the princess after the princely kiss. In her hag-like state after the ‘change’ had come upon her, the prince carries the emaciated form towards shelter and help:

“Mother, mother!” he said. “Poor mother!” and kissed her on the withered lips.

She started; and what eyes they were that opened upon him! [...] she stood upright on her feet. Her hood had dropped, and her hair fell about her. The first gleam of the morning was caught on her face: that face was bright as the never-aging Dawn, and her eyes were lovely as the sky of darkest blue. The prince recoiled in overmastering wonder. It was Daylight herself whom he had brought from the forest! He fell at her feet, nor dared to look up until she laid her hand upon his head. He rose then.

“You kissed me when I was an old woman: there! I kiss you when I am a young princess,” murmured Daylight.—“Is that the sun coming?”³⁵³

Nocturnal voyeurism has been transformed into the diurnal worship of a female deity of immense power whose face is not only ‘bright as the never-aging Dawn,’ but whose eyes—like North Wind’s³⁵⁴ and Diamond’s—are windows to eternity, ‘lovely as the sky of darkest blue’, and who is no longer at a distance but, using imagery from Saint John’s encounter with the risen Christ,³⁵⁵ kisses her male worshipper. The nocturnal dancer may be read as a projection of male fantasy—an unattainable phantasm—a marked contrast with the transfigured woman, now recognised by the prostrate prince as the product of divine ‘fantasy’ and, unlike his own fantasies, eminently real.

Many readings are possible relating to the clandestine, distant, dysfunctional, immature (and so on) attitudes of males towards female sexuality, but from a theological perspective there is a clear message—that mature girls and women are ‘divine’; that is, not idealised objects for male worship, but creatures also made in the image of God. The male response, as illustrated by the prince who ‘recoiled in overmastering wonder [...] and] fell at her feet’³⁵⁶ should be *pure* worship, recognising that ‘[t]he deepest, purest love of a woman has its well-spring in him’.³⁵⁷ that only the recognition of female ‘divinity’ can be the basis for genuine relationship between

³⁵³ *NW*, pp. 290–91.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 114.

³⁵⁵ ‘And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me’ (Rev. 1.17).

³⁵⁶ *NW*, p. 291.

³⁵⁷ *USI*, p. 24.

the sexes, with the corollary that, as male *and* female are made in God's image, God is both 'male' and 'female'.

The narrative insists that adult femininity, particularly menstruation, is not to be feared or considered impure but is part of what it means to be truly human. The quest for childlikeness does not imply a negation of sexuality, despite Diamond's androgyny. If, as Judith Plotz remarks, the 'separation of adult from child defines the Wordsworthian [Romantic] child',³⁵⁸ this narrative goes *some* way to healing that divorce. Furthermore, the transformation of this princess going through puberty into a 'goddess' precludes a reading of MacDonald's notion of childhood as a negation of adulthood.

3.4 Redeeming the child

MacDonald's project is to redeem the child and make the child the mediator of redemption. His fictional children dramatize the rejection of original sin; instead, the *imago Dei* is the image of a loving father *and* mother. The child is, therefore, a theological concept challenging the foundations of contemporary anthropology.

In *North Wind*, MacDonald proposes six attributes that characterise the true child. The first is imagination: that a childlike imagination is needed not just to perceive the 'afterlife', but also *this* life. It is not a rejection of intellection, but a plea for intellect to be led by imagination, a Coleridgean affirmation that humanity is made in the image of an imaginative God. The child embodies a pre-adult, almost prelapsarian, state of human development which is closer to the divine image than that displayed by an adult who has falsely 'learned' mistrust and fear—the fruit of decontextualized logic and unthinking convention. But, as the discussion of *Little Daylight* has shown, this should not be read as a trivial denial of adulthood.

The second is trust evidenced by obedience, a proposal that implies God is worthy of such trust. This informs a rejection of conceptions of God that imply moral uncertainty, and proposes that unquestioning obedience is always rewarded and, if necessary, corrected. That such unquestioning obedience, based as it is on subjective imaginative cues, might be misguided is explored as we consider Diamond's 'unwise' choices. Diamond's perfect intuition of God's

³⁵⁸ See page 33.

will, allied with God's perfect benevolence and foreknowledge, always results in his vindication: the 'what if' questions concerning imperfect cognition or the place of human will are left for the reader to ponder, but the implication is that—even in the last resort—should death result it is not to be feared.

The third is the humanity of the child—it is already fully human and made in God's image. Diamond's premature death—his failure to reach earthly adulthood—should not be viewed as failure. In a society that valued children for what they would become, MacDonald is celebrating the child for what it already is, a complete human being, acceptable as such in God's sight and representative of the race, but furthermore, that the imaginative, trusting, obedient child is closer to God's image than the potentially misguided but confident adult.

The fourth is priesthood; the child in some sense mediates redemption. Diamond functions not as a saviour, but as a mediator between heaven and earth, a role emphasised by his name, 'Dia-mond'. Like the jewel in Aaron's priestly robe, Diamond is a prism refracting heavenly light. Makman has noted that for his Victorian contemporaries, the name would also bring to mind those who worked in the mining industry, 'diamond crackers' who worked coal, 'black diamond'.³⁵⁹ Diamond carries a priestly name which bridges the heights of heaven and the depths of the earth, exposing the darkness of the latter to the light of the former. He is a 'window' to transcendence.

The fifth is innocence—sinlessness. In a culture obsessed with childhood depravity resulting from either original sin or simian ancestry, where those such as Henry Maudsley, using words not dissimilar to Ruskin's, accused Romantics like MacDonald of 'poetical idealism and willing hypocrisy by which a man ignores realities',³⁶⁰ MacDonald portrays this ideal child as being sinless and as having a direct, intuitive connection with God. All these childhood attributes reflect back on the God in whose image humanity is made, notably the perfect *imago Dei*, Christ.

The final and sixth attribute is doubt: evidence of the lack of 'adult' pride—the false security of second-hand, conventional faith. The child accepts the provisionality of its vision and

³⁵⁹ 'A Reading of *NW*', p. 110.

³⁶⁰ Note 205. Discussed further on page 114.

understanding of the world. Those humbly trying to make sense of the world—Diamond, his mother, and even God’s agent North Wind—all express doubt. It is those that have no doubts—such as Nanny and Jim, convinced of Diamond’s insanity—that are lacking discernment. Doubt is a positive force, ‘the first knock at our door of things that are not yet, but have to be, understood’;³⁶¹ an awareness of limitation and a goad to positive action rather than nascent apostasy. Doubt is the valid obverse of faith, the latter reflecting childlike trust despite the former.

God’s child North Wind (‘mother nature’) is also feeling her way subjectively in this deceptive world where evil claims to be good and goodness sometimes wears the mask of evil. Conscience must be her guide: ‘when I do [what the ‘far-off song’ requires] I feel all right, and when I don’t I feel all wrong’. That ‘nature’ sometimes ‘gets it wrong’ or misinterprets divine intention is worrying, implying that God is not so sovereign after all and an ineffective communicator. As for the origin of that song, North Wind notes that according to rumours spread by East Wind (an unreliable source since ‘one does not exactly know how much to believe of what she says, for she is very naughty sometimes’), ‘it is all managed by a baby’.³⁶²

This last phrase indicates the centrality of the child in MacDonald’s theology: even God is, in some sense, ‘a baby’. But before (in Chapter 5) outlining this theology, it will be helpful to explore MacDonald’s more realist fiction and its theological proposals.

³⁶¹ *US2*, p. 201.

³⁶² *NW*, p. 67.

Chapter 4 The child in MacDonald's realist fiction

4.1 Approaching MacDonald's realist fiction

T. S. Eliot observed that:

The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.³⁶³

Perhaps C. S. Lewis's observation that in literature MacDonald has 'no place in its first rank—perhaps not even its second'³⁶⁴ stems primarily from his inability to achieve this separation, particularly in his realist fiction, as evidenced by regular authorial intrusions and didacticism. One might also mention poor plot development, stereotypical characters, prolixity, and implausibility (even by the standards of fairyland). However forgivingly one reads many of his novels, the words 'good art' seldom come to mind. But this does not mean he has nothing important to say. This chapter explores what that might be.

Without committing the intentional fallacy—evaluating a work on the basis of supposed authorial intent rather than the actual work—we may, nevertheless, legitimately draw conclusions that MacDonald may not have intended. First, he himself encouraged this on the basis that images, symbols, and words carry divine meaning opaque to the writer, concluding: 'A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean.'³⁶⁵ Second, as Schleiermacher observed, the artist is often oblivious to his or her own processes and context, leading to the observation that as critics, 'We understand the artful discourses of others better than they do themselves.'³⁶⁶ MacDonald's prose should not, therefore, simply be viewed as illustrating an underlying stratum of bedrock theology. As Hans Frei notes, we should not ask whether the subject matter or the narrative itself is the most meaningful:

The question is illegitimate or redundant. For whatever the situation that may obtain in other types of texts, in narrative of the sort in which character, verbal communications, and circumstances are

³⁶³ *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 48.

³⁶⁴ *Anthology*, p. 14.

³⁶⁵ *Orts*, p. 317, cf. p. 5 (see page 60).

³⁶⁶ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 298.

each determinate of the other and hence of the theme itself, the text, the verbal sense, and not a profound, buried stratum underneath constitutes or determines the subject matter itself.³⁶⁷

Fiction, Frei stresses, is not *illustrative* of what someone thinks, but *constitutive* of it.³⁶⁸

We must not, therefore, be overly simplistic in our critical evaluation of MacDonald's narratives, prematurely dismissing them as bad art: they are not just illustrative of his theology as he sees it, but constitutive of it in a manner which even he may not be aware.

'Few of his novels are good and none is very good', remarked Lewis, but he does allow that '[w]hat he does best is fantasy'. In similar vein, Chesterton remarked that MacDonald gave us jewels in a 'somewhat uneven setting'.³⁶⁹ Lewis's anthology is a collection of such jewels—aphorisms mined from MacDonald's prolixity (primarily his theological essays), a task which Lewis described as 'one of exhumation'.³⁷⁰ Such jewels are no doubt valuable, but the critic must also consider that 'uneven setting', his fictive ontology. Context is as important as content.

Genre is also an issue. *North Wind* is typical of many of MacDonald's novels that focus on idealised children or child-like protagonists who seem curiously impervious to the corrosiveness of life and untouched by its squalor.³⁷¹ They appear singled out by God for special favours, smile when abused, commune with nature, and precociously indulge in 'metaphysics'.³⁷² Inspired by such as Novalis,³⁷³ such novels appear at first sight to be *Bildungsromane*, a genre focusing on the maturation of the protagonist through his or her life journey. To speak of a 'realist *Bildungsroman*', however, is an oxymoron. Stern observes that the *Bildungsroman*—a style initiated by Goethe and which Frei notes 'was to reach its apex in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*'³⁷⁴—is essentially unreal and rooted in the practices of pietistic confessional tracts 'which cling to the genre throughout its history'; also identified is its didactic nature, noting that it is

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 280.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ *GMAW*, p. 13.

³⁷⁰ *Anthology*, pp. 14, 17.

³⁷¹ There are exceptions, as we shall note.

³⁷² Note 221.

³⁷³ There are many parallels between *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, for example, and MacDonald's work. In the latter's 'Curdie' stories, for example, as in *Heinrich*, miners sing and use poetry to defeat evil monsters. In *Heinrich*, there is also the prototype of 'the oldest man of all' in *The Golden Key*. See *Henry of Ofterdingen* (Cambridge: John Owen, 1842), pp. 103–04; cf. *Fairy Tales*, pp. 137–38.

³⁷⁴ *Eclipse*, p. 211.

‘designed to let the hero “eat up the background” and to fill the foreground’.³⁷⁵ The *social* truth of an interdependent self is barely relevant. Instead, as often in MacDonald’s fiction, we are faced with individuals such as Diamond who appear disconnected from quotidian reality. ‘The genre’, Stern concludes, ‘is *solipsistic* and *unrealistic*’.³⁷⁶ The distance from realism perhaps accounts for our lack of sympathy for many of MacDonald’s idealised child characters, feeling that if not deserving of abuse they are at least in some measure inviting it. We feel little sympathy because they appear unreal.

In contrast, the realist author, Stern insists, must be ‘*unambiguously* committed to the world’. This clearly does not apply to MacDonald, committed as he is to the afterlife (and fairyland). Furthermore, if we accept Stern’s definition of realism as ‘connoting a way of depicting, describing a situation in a faithful, accurate, “life-like” manner [... which] necessarily means in some sense faithfully representing the real world’,³⁷⁷ then clearly MacDonald’s realist novels should not be labelled as such. As we approach his ‘realist’ novels, therefore, it is important not to prematurely dismiss them as ‘unreal’ on the basis of faulty classification. Lewis observed that MacDonald’s novels are at their best when they ‘depart most from the canons of novel-writing, and that in two directions’:

Sometimes they depart in order to come nearer to fantasy, as in the whole character of the hero in *Sir Gibbie* or the opening chapters of *Wilfrid Cumberland*. Sometimes they diverge into direct and prolonged preachments which would be intolerable if a man were reading for the story, but which are in fact welcome because the author, though a poor novelist, is a supreme preacher.³⁷⁸

With this in mind we first turn to *Sir Gibbie* and then to *Wilfrid Cumberland*.

4.2 The innocent child

If Diamond is a prophet, Gibbie—the hero of *Sir Gibbie* (1879)—is a type of Christ, fundamentally innocent and untainted by sin. Mute, he is ‘as a sheep before its shearers [...] silent’³⁷⁹ and

³⁷⁵ J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 101.

³⁷⁶ Ibid. (emphasis mine).

³⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 40, 42.

³⁷⁸ *Anthology*, p. 17.

³⁷⁹ Isa. 53.7.

carries a cross on his back—scars cut by the gamekeeper’s whip as a result of muteness being misinterpreted as guilt. In some sense he is carrying the sin of humanity.³⁸⁰

We first meet eight-year-old Gibbie crouched in a ‘narrow dirty lane’ in Aberdeen (‘the grey city’) sifting the gutter for a lost earring. Implausibly but triumphantly successful, he ‘sucked it to clear it from the last of the gutter’ and, after thumping through ‘street after street’ on bare feet, returns it to the grateful baker’s daughter, receiving no reward for his trouble.³⁸¹ The child, it is proposed, will always find what it seeks. *Gibbie* also confirms the thesis in *North Wind*: that exercising faith provides immunity from evil—even the filth of a Victorian gutter. MacDonald explicitly states his thesis thus: ‘In proportion to the falsehood in us are we exposed to the falsehood of others.’³⁸² So despite his starvation diet, ‘Gibbie’s health was splendid. His senses were also marvellously acute’,³⁸³ and, although both whipped and later shot by his nemesis the gamekeeper, appears little troubled by his experiences. It is theology which minimises Jesus’s observation that ‘in the world you will have trouble’³⁸⁴—trouble that has real negative consequences.³⁸⁵ Here, as elsewhere, MacDonald’s portrayal of evil is unconvincing (unlike, say, Dostoevsky’s abused children):³⁸⁶ he seems to have an authorial disinclination to face its true horror.

Gibbie is an idea, not a child. He has ‘notable eyes [... of] a deep blue’ that are windows to a transcendent realm.³⁸⁷ In contrast to his muteness, in his eyes ‘diffused meaning seemed in them to deepen almost to speech’. His face is ‘luminous’ and surrounded by ‘hair which stuck out from his head in every direction’,³⁸⁸ reminiscent of Wordsworth’s daisy, that—

Sweet *silent* creature!
That breath’st with me in sun and air,
Do thou, as thou art wont, repair

³⁸⁰ For a more detailed discussion of Gibbie’s innocence, see my ‘The Innocence of George MacDonald’, in *Innocence Uncovered*, ed. by Elizabeth S. Dodd and Carl E. Findley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 41–57.

³⁸¹ *Sir Gibbie* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1880), pp. 3–5.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 326.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁸⁴ Jn 16.33.

³⁸⁵ Such as ‘mockings and scourgings [...] chains and imprisonment’, and so on (Heb. 11.36–37).

³⁸⁶ Such as the serf boy thrown to the dogs in *The Brothers Karamazov* (v. 4).

³⁸⁷ See note 353.

³⁸⁸ *Gibbie*, pp. 1–2.

My heart with gladness, and a share
Of thy meek nature!³⁸⁹

Gibbie's 'meek nature' also 'repairs the heart' of others, and MacDonald's Wordsworth essay, which quotes these lines, concludes by reinforcing the view, central in *Sir Gibbie*, that nature is the expression of God's imagination, an expression that is 'certainly higher than mere intellectual teaching':

If the world proceeded from the imagination of God, and man proceeded from the love of God, it is easy to believe that that which proceeded from the imagination of God should rouse the best thoughts in the mind of a being who proceeded from the love of God. This I think is the relation between man and the world.³⁹⁰

Gibbie, the perfect *imago Dei*, exhibits these attributes: he 'proceeds from the love of God' exhibiting Christ-like perfection, and in his affinity with nature, engages 'the imagination of God'. He and nature are the narrative's windows on eternity. Like 'Dia-mond', he mediates between heaven and earth.³⁹¹

Such affinity with nature is demonstrated, for example, when Gibbie finds sanctuary with an old hill shepherd and his wife. The former accedes to Gibbie being trialled with the sheepdog despite his obvious concern that mute Gibbie 'canna speyk to the dog'.³⁹² Happily, however, at their first meeting:

The dog looked up into his face, noting every glance and gesture, and, partly from sympathetic instinct, that gift lying so near the very essence of life, partly from observation of the state of affairs in respect of the sheep, divined with certainty what the duty required of him was, and was off like a shot.

"The twa dumb craturs un'erstan' ane anither better nor I un'erstan' aither o' them," said Robert to his wife when they came home.³⁹³

This last sentence reflects the Romantic view that 'the more schooling, the less childhood';³⁹⁴ that real human childhood is 'natural' and includes 'sympathetic instinct, that gift ly-

³⁸⁹ 'Wordsworth's Poetry', *Orts*, p. 251 (emphasis mine).

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 251, 254.

³⁹¹ Page 84.

³⁹² This Abrahamic couple regard Gibbie as 'the son of [their] old age' (*Gibbie*, p. 205).

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

³⁹⁴ *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, p. 33.

ing so near the very essence of life', in marked contrast to the affectations of 'culture'. The latter is exemplified in this text by Rev Clement Sclater's preoccupation with appearances.³⁹⁵

Here, both schooled by nature, Gibbie and the dog have a natural affinity.³⁹⁶

However, such scenes are unconvincing and appear to trouble MacDonald. For example, at one point Gibbie finds refuge in a seedy waterfront bar, however, 'Evil language and coarse behaviour alike passed over him, without leaving the smallest stain upon heart or conscience, desire or will.'³⁹⁷ This unlikely state of affairs leads MacDonald to remark:

If anyone thinks I am unfaithful to human fact, and over-charge the description of this child, I on my side doubt the experience of that man or woman. I admit the child a rarity, but a rarity in the right direction, and therefore a being with whom humanity has the greater need to be acquainted.³⁹⁸

That MacDonald believes he has been '*faithful* to human fact' is, I suggest, doubtful: like the Little Ones in *Lilith*,³⁹⁹ Gibbie's innocence is not merely sinlessness but an impossible prelapsarian naivety. Rather, this is a 'making-strange'⁴⁰⁰ in order to challenge concepts of reality. Gibbie, like Diamond, is considered an 'innocent', 'a born idiot', an 'odd-looking lad [... a] strange-looking creature [...] a mad-like object' by many,⁴⁰¹ yet is brought before us as the exemplary 'child in the midst' who has chosen to be obedient to Christ (for his devotion to 'the Presence' in nature is synonymous with such obedience).⁴⁰² However, unlike Jesus who brings before us an ordinary child, MacDonald brings before us 'Jesus' in Gibbie, described and perceived as 'a *rarity*'. This 'divine idiot' (as the narrator calls him)⁴⁰³ suggests that godly sanity is perceived as idiocy by the ungodly. But is this 'innocent' (that is, sinless and naive) child truly 'a being with whom humanity has the greater need to be acquainted' or simply a deceptive and

³⁹⁵ The ladies of Mr Sclater's congregation also seek to 'civilize' Gibbie (p. 37).

³⁹⁶ See note 402.

³⁹⁷ *Gibbie*, p. 42.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43. I am grateful to John Pridmore for drawing attention to some of the issues developed in this chapter, including MacDonald's awareness of Gibbie's implausibility. ('George Macdonald's Estimate of Childhood', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 12 (2007), 61–74 (p. 69).)

³⁹⁹ See page 192.

⁴⁰⁰ Discussed in section 6.3 (b).

⁴⁰¹ *Gibbie*, pp. 229, 230, 241. The faithful shepherdess, Janet, is also disparaged by the pragmatic farmer's wife as a 'sort of heaven-favoured idiot' (*ibid.*, p. 201).

⁴⁰² Gibbie is tutored by 'Mother Nature' (*ibid.*, p. 58)—'God's [...] embodied thoughts' (*Orts*, p. 320).

⁴⁰³ *Gibbie*, p. 250.

unattainable ideal? Phrasing this question theologically: does this idealised ‘true child’ reflect the biblical call to become ‘like children’?

MacDonald’s narrative is not realist. It must be considered as either ‘fairy story’, hagiography, or iconography: fantasy that gives us a new perspective on reality, a legendary (semi-fictional) account of a real saintly character (the child is ‘a rarity’ but—he maintains—based on reality), or a sacramental stylised icon pointing beyond itself to transcendent reality. In some measure it is all of these. Either way, we are dealing with art that evokes an aesthetic response, an issue we will consider later, but two theological proposals are clear: first, that it is possible to live ‘innocently’ in the quotidian context, and second, that those who make such a choice are immune from the consequences of evil. We now consider a third proposition: that ‘children’ are not only immune from the consequences of evil, but help to neutralise it.

Sir Gibbie suggests that all evil is God’s blunt instrument to bring about repentance. As a consequence, MacDonald inadvertently champions the doctrine of election (something he explicitly renounces)⁴⁰⁴ for the only explanation for Gibbie’s superhuman ability to resist and overcome evil is that although ‘he knew not the Presence’, ‘The Presence, indeed, was with him [...] Yea, the Presence was in his very soul.’⁴⁰⁵ Indeed, in perhaps an unfortunate choice of words, ‘Gibbie was one of those few *elect* natures to whom obedience is a delight.’⁴⁰⁶

Thus a widespread flood, that some consider a second Genesis deluge, is not ‘natural evil’ but ‘natural good’.⁴⁰⁷ It is one of God’s ‘evil’ sheepdogs that worry the wanderer back to the fold (for the good shepherd commands ‘a terrible set of sheep-dogs’, including ‘pain, fear, anxiety, and shame [...] sacred creatures [that] work[ed] the will of the Father’).⁴⁰⁸ Ignoring the wider devastation, MacDonald’s focus is uniquely on the cathartic effect of this major incident on a small, impotent group huddled for shelter in a Noah’s ark of a farmhouse which becomes an island in a sea of floodwater. They are morally challenged: some respond positively, others

⁴⁰⁴ See for example *US2*, p. 244.

⁴⁰⁵ *Gibbie*, p. 88.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 192–233.

⁴⁰⁸ ‘Sermon by Dr. George Macdonald (Reprinted Courtesy of the *Huntly Express* from their September 21, 1889 Issue)’, *Wingfold*, 89 (2015), 29–30 (p. 30). On returning to the city, Gibbie observes that ‘The Master was in its streets as certainly as on the rocks of Glashgar [the upland pasture]. Not one sheep did he lose sight of, though he could not do so much for those that would not follow, and had to have the dog sent after them!’ (*Gibbie*, p. 249; cf. *US2*, p. 194).

do not. It is God's mercy on them; good which helps to shape their moral character and therefore eternal destiny. Only Gibbie is empowered to leave the island and rescue others.

The picture is one of a divine puppet-master ensuring that 'all things work together for good' for the faithful *and* the reprobate, protecting the former from harm and using the negative responses of the latter to contribute to their eventual reformation. Unlike Eliot's flood in *The Mill on the Floss*, there are no well-meaning Maggies who rescue Toms (convinced God is with them) only to be embraced by a watery death.⁴⁰⁹ It is a Genesis deluge without judgement on the wicked.

Sir Gibbie suggests that *all* suffering is purgatorial—a 'necessary evil' to bring about moral reform—but MacDonald makes a more profound theological proposal: he suggests that the suffering of children such as Gibbie, 'a copy in small of the good shepherd',⁴¹⁰ absorbs evil *on behalf of others*; that children suffer vicariously by sharing Christ's suffering, a curious proposal from one who explicitly rejects substitutionary atonement theories. In *The Hope of the Gospel* he makes this clear:

Very different are the good news Jesus brings us from certain prevalent representations of the gospel, founded on the pagan notion that suffering is an offset for sin, and culminating in the vile assertion that the suffering of an innocent man, just because he is innocent, yea perfect, is a satisfaction to the holy Father for the evil deeds of his children.⁴¹¹

This reveals a paradox. On the one hand, MacDonald's focus is very much on sin—evil as human immorality—yet, on the other, Gibbie's suffering is somehow dealing with 'evil' on another level, as if it were a substance divorced from agency. For example, after being cut by the gamekeeper's whip, Gibbie instinctively staggers to the upland pasture to find refuge. He approaches the cottage of the old shepherd and his wife. As she stands in the doorway, like John before the glorified Christ, he 'fell on his face at her feet like one dead';⁴¹² however, here the roles are reversed: it is 'Christ' who has fallen at the feet of his disciple. On seeing the cross cut into his back, she wonders:

⁴⁰⁹ 'God has taken care of me,' says Maggie, 'to bring me to you' (*The Mill on the Floss* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 520).

⁴¹⁰ *Gibbie*, p. 139.

⁴¹¹ *HG*, p. 81.

⁴¹² Cf. Rev. 1.17.

Could it be that the Lord was still, child and man, suffering for his race, to deliver his brothers and sisters from their sins?—wandering, enduring, beaten, blessing still? accepting the evil, slaying it, and returning none? his patience the one rock where evil word finds no echo; his heart the one gulf into which the dead-sea wave rushes with no recoil; the one abyss of destroying love, into which all wrong tumbles, and finding no reaction, is lost, ceases for evermore?⁴¹³

John Pridmore notes that the words ‘the one abyss of destroying love’ are ‘rewritten, almost as an afterthought, in the margin of a manuscript repeatedly scored and written across’:

Something more is being claimed here than that [*sic*] the notion, that MacDonald more than once entertains, that every child comes to us as Jesus born anew.⁴¹⁴

This is certainly Gibbie’s posture: he ‘accepts evil, slays it, and returns none’. He is not so much *like* Christ as *part of* Christ. In other words, just as natural evil such as floods cathartically purge the landscape and those within it, the suffering of the child purges the world of evil. Pridmore concludes that MacDonald is indeed suggesting that childhood suffering has atoning value.

The old shepherdess, however, reflects on Paul’s enigmatic words in Colossians 1.24. Do those such as Gibbie really make the world ‘less like hell’?—

Were there always innocents in the world, who in their own persons, by the will of God, and unknown to themselves, carried on the work of Christ, filling up that which was left behind of the sufferings of their Master—women, children, infants, idiots—creatures of sufferance, with souls open to the world to receive wrong, that it might pass and cease?⁴¹⁵

Dostoevsky (or at least Ivan Karamazov) would no doubt question the divine morality of using such innocents as channels ‘unknown to themselves’ to purge the world of evil.⁴¹⁶ Nevertheless, here MacDonald *is* expressing this belief: inasmuch as such ‘innocents’ are part of Christ’s earthly body, the community of saints, so they share in this absorbing purgatorial office. In Janet’s words: ‘little furnaces they, of the consuming fire, to swallow up and destroy by

⁴¹³ Gibbie, p. 123.

⁴¹⁴ ‘George Macdonald’s Estimate of Childhood’, p. 70.

⁴¹⁵ Gibbie, p. 227. The absence of men from this list suggests that the stereotypical dominant male—that Charles Kingsley proposed should be ‘like a knight of old’, aware ‘that the kingdom of nature, like the kingdom of heaven, must be taken by violence’ (Adelene Buckland, *Novel Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 185)—is far from ‘innocent’.

⁴¹⁶ For Ivan Karamazov, children being ‘punished for their fathers who have eaten the apple, [...] is an argument from another world, an argument that is incomprehensible to the human heart here on earth’ (*The Brothers Karamazov*, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1973), I, p. 278 (v. 4).

uncomplaining endurance—the divine destruction!’.⁴¹⁷ In other words, childlike innocence is not only impervious to evil, but opposes and destroys it.

However, one must distinguish between childhood suffering being contributive to the ‘fire’ that helps *others* to turn from their sin, and suffering being a vicarious offset somehow balancing the universal scales. It is this distinction that MacDonald makes in his criticism of popular atonement theories, and one which perhaps Pridmore does not.

That ‘evil’ is essentially a divine purgatorial fire leads to the view that evil has no purchase on the innocent child since it has no need of reform. The radiating ‘energy’ of God traverses the diamond-child perfectly; no ‘heat’ is generated as there is no sinful resistance—no ‘dark matter’.⁴¹⁸ Instead, the child itself becomes a coal in that fire, or rather, a window to the divine furnace, as it embraces God. The fire only burns the unchildlike—a fire of which quotidian ‘evil’ (such as floods) are an expression. It is a perennial theme. In *A Rough Shaking*, for example, we meet a similarly disadvantaged child, Clare Skymer, whose earliest memory is of (perhaps) the Lisbon earthquake, the ‘Auschwitz of the eighteenth century’ when thousands died while worshipping on All Saints’ Day in 1755.⁴¹⁹ It is, however, a sanitised ‘Auschwitz’ in that despite his mother being killed and him being separated from his father, no serious harm befalls Clare since he is the embodiment of ‘pure righteousness’.⁴²⁰ Destitute Clare, like Gibbie, is fostered and fed by various surrogate parents and nature until, years later, he is miraculously reunited with his father through a series of improbable ‘coincidences’. God is working hard behind the scenes, once again implying a measure of election.

MacDonald’s choice to focus on the positive outcome for this one child, rather than those maimed and killed, is, at best, a lesson that each individual is precious in God’s sight, and that it is that individual’s response to God that counts. At worst, though, it is a caricature of lived reality that strongly suggests MacDonald’s theology of evil is flawed. Leaving to one side the issue

⁴¹⁷ Gibbie, p. 227.

⁴¹⁸ MacDonald, having studied physics, would have been aware of infra-red radiation—the ‘calorific rays’ described by William Herschel to the Royal Society in March 1800—that would heat anything but a perfectly transparent body. Satan is thus conceived as the perfect ‘black body’. (See section 7.6, ‘Satan, the great Shadow’.)

⁴¹⁹ Mary Ann Gillies suggests the story is based on an earthquake that rocked MacDonald’s home in Italy in 1887 (*The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880–1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 189, n. 41).

⁴²⁰ *A Rough Shaking* (London: Blackie and Son Ltd., [1897?]), p. 206.

that (if he has Lisbon in mind) thousands died in agony while trusting in God as collapsing churches buried them, Clare's smiles in response to abuse⁴²¹ mean that some, as in the cases of both Gibbie and Diamond, 'imagined the boy a simpleton'.⁴²² In short, both fictively and in 'reality', one must conclude something is not quite 'right' with this child or MacDonald's doctrine of evil.

More worryingly, perhaps, is the idealisation of social deprivation. The narrator remarks:

He was often cold and always hungry, but his life was anything but dull. The man who does not know where his next meal is to come from, is seldom afflicted with ennui. That is the monopoly of the enviable with nothing to do, and everything money can get them. A foolish west-end life has immeasurably more discomfort in it than that of a street Arab. The ordinary beggar, while in tolerable health, finds far more enjoyment than most fashionable ladies.⁴²³

The 'ordinary beggar' here, I suggest, is not the fruit of MacDonald's imagination but of his fancy.⁴²⁴ MacDonald could not have been completely blind to the suffering and death of so many 'street Arabs'.⁴²⁵ Neither, having worked in Bolton in 1855, would he have been unaware that, having survived childbirth, numerous children only lived a few short poverty-stricken and exploitative years. Few 'street Arabs' would have been in 'tolerable health', and although 'seldom afflicted with ennui' were no doubt afflicted in worse ways. Yet MacDonald says of Skymer: 'Not once yet had he lost heart. In very virtue of unselfishness and lack of resentment, he was strong. Not once had he shed a tear for himself, not once had he pitied his own condition.'⁴²⁶ We must conclude that this child is not human or, more to the point, not symbolic of true humanity.

⁴²¹ Ibid., p. 289.

⁴²² Ibid., pp. 162, 252, 376.

⁴²³ Ibid., p. 291.

⁴²⁴ Human imagination partners with God's in the discernment of truth; fancy does not (see note 64).

⁴²⁵ Plotz suggests that terms such as 'street Arabs' were used as a coping mechanism to avoid having to face the suffering of real children. (*Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, pp. 35–38.)

⁴²⁶ *A Rough Shaking*, p. 291.

4.3 The abused and disturbed child

4.3 (a) Annie in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*

A more genuine image of child suffering is found in Annie who plays opposite (and eventually marries) Alec in *Alec Forbes*, one of MacDonald's most autobiographical Scottish novels.⁴²⁷ Small-town education centres around the sadistic schoolmaster Murdoch Malison, a violent tawse-wielder who 'had *nothing of the childlike in himself*, and consequently *never saw the mind of the child* whose person he was assailing'; a master with a 'savage sense of duty' and the belief that '[j]ustice [...] consisted in vengeance'.⁴²⁸ He is the antithesis of the child: an unimaginative rationalist who 'never saw beyond the symptoms [surface]'.⁴²⁹ When children come home covered in weals (and one permanently disabled by a shattered kneecap), parents, it seems—like MacDonald—turn a blind eye to evil.⁴³⁰ Having suffered such education themselves, there is resigned parental acceptance of the status quo. Convention is not challenged. Malison is only once confronted by a brave parent (Alec's mother).

Likewise, there is tacit acceptance of Malison's divine counterpart who presides over small-town religion capriciously choosing some for favour and others for damnation. The picture is one of denial: the children suffer stoically and when released from school do their best to enjoy life. At weekends, adults are harangued by hellfire preachers in the 'Missionar-kirk' or attempt to find solace in the 'muckle kirk',⁴³¹ but likewise, when released, most do their best to forget God midweek. The spiritual and material worlds are strangely discontiguous, particularly, it appears, in the moral realm where two standards appear to operate. For example, when Alec meets Malison out of school—the former the victim of the latter's sadism—they have a disturbingly pleasant conversation concluding with Alec inviting his tormentor to dinner. The narrator paints an unlikely schizophrenic picture of the master:

I shall not have to show much more than half of Mr. Malison's life—the school half, which, both inwardly and outwardly, was very different from the other. The moment he was out of the school,

⁴²⁷ *GM*, pp. 187–90.

⁴²⁸ *AF*, I, pp. 127, 61, 62.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 133.

⁴³⁰ Discussed further below.

⁴³¹ 'Missionars' was a derogatory term for Independents from England; the 'muckle kirk', the 'big church', was the Church of Scotland parish church. (*AF*, I, p. 226.)

the moment, that is, that he ceased for the day to be responsible for the moral and intellectual condition of his turbulent subjects, the whole character—certainly the whole deportment of the man changed. He was now as meek and gentle in speech and behaviour as any mother could have desired.⁴³²

Through the reader's disquiet at Alec's civility to his tormenter, MacDonald is challenging unthinking 'civility' towards the God that Malison represents. He is asking: would you invite this 'God' back to your home? It is one of the novels that prompted Samuel Law Wilson to complain about MacDonald's caricaturing of Calvinism.⁴³³ Here, Malison's divine counterpart presides over a religion of darkness whose worshippers are misguided and lack sense. In one scene, for example, recently orphaned Annie visits the honest but over-zealous dissenting stonemason, Thomas Cramm. The image is of drawing towards darkness:

For Thomas had been sitting in the dark till he could see in it (which, however, is not an invariable result), while out of the little light Annie had come into none at all. But she obeyed the voice, and went straight forward into the dark [...]:

"Noo, my lass, ye'll ken what faith means. Whan God tells ye to gang into the mirk, gang!"

"But I dinna like the mirk," said Annie.

"No human sowl *can*," responded Thomas. "Jean, fess a can'le direckly."⁴³⁴

Cramm is sitting in the darkness of Calvinism trying to 'see in the dark', but it is Annie, the 'candle' entering from the world of nature, who carries light. 'Mirk' could equally be 'Kirk' since, through the blunt character of Cramm, MacDonald is just as critical of the Kirk whose aged and ineffective minister is in the pay of the local laird.⁴³⁵

Cramm is an honest, uneducated soul trapped within his religion, unable to converse without trying to convert, often speaking in religious jargon.⁴³⁶ His cynical friend the carpenter, for example, sighs that 'it's a weary war!' as they pat down the earth on Annie's father's freshly-dug grave, to which Thomas responds:

⁴³² Ibid., I, p. 215. Malison is based on Huntly teacher Colin Stewart, said to be even more violent than his fictional counterpart. (*GM*, p. 189.)

⁴³³ Page 19.

⁴³⁴ *AF*, I, pp. 256–57.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., I, pp. 226–27.

⁴³⁶ He is modelled on the Aberdeenshire evangelist, James Maitland (*GM*, p. 190) and his gruff honesty makes him one of the most convincing, even endearing, characters; a genuinely caring man who becomes for Annie 'an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest' (*AF*, II, p. 244; Isa. 32.2).

“Ye hae no richt to say sae, George [...] for ye hae never met it, an’ foughen wi’ ’t. Ye hae never draan the soord o’ the Lord and o’ Gideon. Ye hae never broken the pitcher, to lat the lamp shine out, an’ I doubt ye hae smo’red it [and you’d probably have smothered it] by this time. And sae, whan the bridegroom comes, ye’ll be ill-aff for a licht.”⁴³⁷

But it is Thomas who is trapped in lightless religion. However, he is one whose ‘genuine religious feeling and *experience* [...] will now and then crack the prisoning pitcher, and let some brilliant ray of the indwelling glory out, to discomfit the beleaguering hosts of troublous thoughts’.⁴³⁸ He is, in other words, a believer in spite of the ‘prisoning pitcher’ of Calvinism, and those ‘troublous thoughts’ primarily concern whether he and his friends are among the elect—a subject mentioned twenty-four times, often by Annie.

Annie is a vulnerable child who genuinely suffers. After the death of her father she is lodged with avaricious shopkeeper Robert Bruce, the snake in this dubious Eden, a man more concerned to bank her modest dowry than look after her. Bruce, in Thomas’s opinion, ‘wadna fling a bane till a dog, afore he had ta’en a pyke at it himsel’,⁴³⁹ and Annie finds herself little more than a slave, forced to sleep in a rat-infested attic, kept on a starvation diet, taunted by Bruce’s sons, and has her luxurious hair cut off by Bruce’s wife to sell to the barber to make a few more pennies for the till.

There is much scope here for—and indulgence in—Victorian sentimentality, however the abuse is real. MacDonald is exploring the suffering of an innocent and God’s response. Terrified of rats, she cries out: ‘O God, tak care o’ me frae the rottans.’ The instant reply ‘from heaven in answer to this little one’s prayer: the cat’ sets the tone for the story.⁴⁴⁰ God has all under control. Annie, however, unaware that she is ‘elect’, is tormented by angst about her standing with God, compounded, rather than ameliorated, by hellfire sermons and Thomas’s well-meaning attempts to get her ‘convertit’. This scenario, where children are subjected to weekday abuse at school, weekend abuse by the church, and, in Annie’s case, ongoing abuse at home,

⁴³⁷ *AF*, I, pp. 13–14.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.* II, p. 111.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 31. Bruce’s real-life counterpart had to leave Huntly, so damaged was his reputation after the publication of this novel. (*GM*, p. 190.)

⁴⁴⁰ *AF*, I, p. 52.

prompts a Dostoevskian question from MacDonald: ‘A *man* ought to be able to endure grief suffering wrongfully, and be none the worse; but who dares demand that of a child?’⁴⁴¹

The answer in this narrative is: those who believe that God is like Murdoch Malison. In other words, humans are responsible for suffering, not God. But unlike Dostoevsky’s indignation about childhood suffering, or Christ’s anger at injustice, MacDonald here offers a very lame response. Noting the destructiveness of a northern winter on ‘the old and sickly, in poor homes, with scanty food and firing’, he remarks: ‘Little children suffer too, though the gift of forgetfulness does for them what the gift of faith does for their parents.’⁴⁴² MacDonald, then, focuses on God’s ability to help God’s children to endure and forget suffering rather than face the possibility that genuinely destructive evil exists which should be addressed.

The message is that God *always* responds to innocents like Annie. She finally has an epiphany, realising that:

“He has been wi’ me a’ the time, my God! He gied me my father, and sent Broonie [her favourite cow] to tak’ care o’ me [...] And he sent the cat whan I gaed till him aboot the rottans. An’ he ’s been wi’ me I kenna hoo lang, and he’s wi’ me noo. [...] And I’ll try sair to be a gude bairn. Eh me! It’s jist wonnerfu! And God’s jist ... naething but God himsel’.”⁴⁴³

That Annie simply decides to be ‘a gude bairn’ is a ‘conversion’ that offends those such as Wilson as it bypasses the ‘moral appliances of Evangelical religion’.⁴⁴⁴ It is the Spirit working through nature that draws humanity.

There is, in my view, a flaw in this work that reveals a weakness in MacDonald’s anthropology; it concerns the relationship between Murdoch Malison (‘murder, son of evil’) and his pupils. So far, with large doses of temporary ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, the idealised children we have met are believable, if only as recognisable symbols pointing towards an *aspect* of childhood or Christlikeness. Gibbie, as noted, is described as ‘a rarity’: at minimum he is that; more plausibly he is an impossibility used to illustrate an idea. The problem in *Alec Forbes* is that—apart from Robert Bruce’s fairly ‘normal’ taunting sons—the other children appear too

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., I, p. 127.

⁴⁴² Ibid., I, p. 130; cf. ‘George Macdonald’s Estimate of Childhood’, p. 65.

⁴⁴³ *AF*, III, p. 164.

⁴⁴⁴ Page 18.

nice. Yes, they (especially the boys) get up to childhood pranks and are called ‘loons’, but their collective reaction to Malison’s abuse raises questions. It begins with the egregious account of Truffy (possibly modelled on MacDonald’s own brother),⁴⁴⁵ the boy ‘kneecapped’ by Malison.

This emaciated child had been deposited at school by a grandfather whose parting words were: ‘Noo ye jist gie them their whups weel, Maister Mailison, for ye ken that he that spareth the rod, blaudeth the bairn.’⁴⁴⁶ Malison does not disappoint. The problem is that after a vicious assault and a long convalescence, the child returns to school, disabled, with ‘a smile on his worn face, which shone’, only too ready to shake hands with his torturer and let bygones be bygones.⁴⁴⁷ The smile and demeanour imply that suffering has done the child good: he is transformed. We *might* just accept this as somehow typological, but it gets worse.

Malison, a licensed minister, has designs on the living at the Kirk, and, in a quest to secure the position, preaches a sermon. It goes disastrously wrong. The congregation splutters with suppressed laughter and Malison leaves in disgrace. Truffy, however, mortified that his new-found father-figure has failed, stumps after him to see him safely home, and the following morning ‘laid a splendid bunch of cottage flowers on [the master’s] desk, and the next morning it was so crowded with offerings of the same sort that he had quite a screen behind which to conceal his emotion’. MacDonald declares: ‘Wonderful [...] is the divine revenge!’ The children ‘would wipe away the humiliation of their tyrant’; that despite years of suffering, they ‘loved the man beneath whose lashes they had writhed in torture’.⁴⁴⁸

However forgivingly one reads this, it seems—as F. R. Leavis once remarked of one of George Eliot’s more inferior works—to be ‘the work of a very gifted mind, but of a mind misusing itself’.⁴⁴⁹ Here we have a conflation of the Romantic child icon with real children: a projection of inherent innocence and moral integrity onto children as a class resulting in absurdity. The intended message is that childhood suffering is never wasted, however this account undermines any meaningful understanding of that proposal. It implies that the answer to MacDon-

⁴⁴⁵ *GMAW*, p. 60.

⁴⁴⁶ *AF*, I, p. 240.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 270.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 232. John Pridmore notes: ‘It is almost impossible for the modern reader to be other than appalled’ by this account. (‘George Macdonald’s Estimate of Childhood’, p. 69.)

⁴⁴⁹ *The Great Tradition* (New York: George W. Stewart, 1950), p. 50.

ald's question — 'who dares demand [suffering] of a child?' — must be 'God', for in order to reform one sadistic man, God has allowed a class of children to suffer terribly. That children *as a class* are undamaged by evil and have the innate ability to make profound moral choices—in this case to unconditionally forgive and love a sadist—is more than simply a rejection of the doctrine of original sin. It is, again, the claim that the child is impervious to surrounding quotidian corruption and absorbs evil on behalf of humanity.

4.3 (b) Charley Osbourne in *Wilfrid Cumberlande*

In an era when Marx, Engels, Dickens, and others were passionately addressing social ills and social philosophy, Ruskin was probably right to accuse MacDonald of unreality. He writes, for example, of the first volume of *Unspoken Sermons* that:

They are the best sermons—beyond all compare—that I have ever read, and if ever sermons did good, these will. [...] If they were but true [...]. But I feel so strongly that it is only the image of your own mind that you see in the sky!⁴⁵⁰

These words might well have given some impetus to the writing of *Wilfrid Cumberlande*, which, four years later, explored the nature of such mental images 'in the sky'.

Significantly darker than narratives discussed so far, *Cumberlande* explores the life of a disturbed 'child' which ends in suicide. The *Spectator* described the plot as 'uncommonly good' notwithstanding the 'tendency to religious or rather spiritual speculation and exposition'.⁴⁵¹ Lengthy dialogues explore whether one can trust one's senses to correctly 'decode' nature's cues and discern God. Nature, 'the robe of Deity',⁴⁵² is, in this novel, often distorted, muted, ignored, or misunderstood. This dark mental landscape, if taken in isolation, would firmly contradict Gabelman's and Lewis's insistence that MacDonald was a sunny and playful man,⁴⁵³ a narrative testing MacDonald's own theses that all things work together for good (all the time) and that death itself is a good. Here, the abuse is psychological rather than physical, but still religiously motivated. It explores depression, repression, domination, madness, evil, death and

⁴⁵⁰ *GMAW*, p. 337.

⁴⁵¹ 'Wilfrid Cumberlande', *Spectator*, 9 March 1872.

⁴⁵² *Wilfrid Cumberlande* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., [1895(?)]), p. 507.

⁴⁵³ *George MacDonald* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), pp. 66–67; *Anthology*, p. 14.

suicide, focused on the question: 'Are not the forms of madness most frequently those of love and religion?'⁴⁵⁴

As a work 'shadowing out [...] my present condition of mind', as the 'autobiographical' narrator, Cumbermede, puts it,⁴⁵⁵ it expresses MacDonald's radical idealism; objective physicality becomes increasingly peripheral. After the suicide of his friend, Cumbermede remarks: 'At this time I had no outer life at all. Whatever bore to me the look of existence was within me.' And as he becomes more reflective than active, wonders what would happen 'if thought, lording it alone, should assume a reality beyond its right?'⁴⁵⁶ In this text, nature is veiled by convention; each character is self-focused, blind to the divine presence within and without as a result of self (and, by implication, rationalism) 'lording it alone'.

The novel portrays a web of mutually dependent yet, ultimately, self-centred destructive relationships. Fathers are corrupt, domineering, inept, scheming or—in the case of the main protagonist, Cumbermede—missing. Unlike those discussed above, this narrative comes closest to facing the reality of a corrupt world. Questioning his own proposal that those who seek good will always find it, MacDonald asks: is it really possible for a child to find God when all the evidence points to the contrary? A striking passage, when the 'true hearted' Cumbermede is reflecting on the suicide of his best friend (also portrayed as true-hearted child), brings this question into focus:

To say that the world had grown black to me is as nothing: I ceased—I will not say *to believe* in God [...]—but I ceased to hope in God. The universe had grown a negation which yet forced its presence upon me—a death that bred worms. If there were a God anywhere, this universe could be nothing more than his forsaken moth-eaten garment. He was a God who did not care.⁴⁵⁷

Echoing Darwin, if nature is the 'robe of God' then it is a discarded robe, perhaps picked up by a demon, or—as one contemporary sceptic put it—nature is a 'fierce schoolmistress who circles the brow of her children with fire instead of filling their brains with light'.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁴ *Cumbermede*, p. 448.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 487 (perhaps a dig at '*cogito, ergo sum*').

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

⁴⁵⁸ Kenneth Morency, 'Religion and Education', *The Critic*, 9 (1850), 183–84 (p. 183).

The plot centres around Wilfrid Cumbermede's friendship with Charley. The former, unaware that he is heir to the estate on which he lives (the earth), is searching for the truth about his missing father (God). At the outset, MacDonald introduces doubt as to whether we can trust our senses. The child Wilfrid observes that the trees in the distance always move when the wind blows and concludes that they are the source of the wind: 'I used my natural senses and this is what they told me.'⁴⁵⁹ Similarly, Charley continually misinterprets cues from nature, people, and God, concluding eventually that life is pointless and that suicide is the only reasonable response. The narrator concurs: suicide is a rejection of worldly evil; an intuitive act of fleeing to the presence of God:

Whenever the thought arose that God might have given him a fairer chance in this world, I was able to reflect that apparently God does not care for this world save as a part of the whole; and on that whole I had yet to discover that he could have given him a fairer chance.⁴⁶⁰

Here, as in *Alec Forbes*, the abuse is attributed to distorted religion. Charley's minister father is a dogmatic zealot, convinced his sensitive son is damned. However, there is a deeper, sinister aspect to the father's abusive behaviour, an evil, repressive demeanour—a madness—that is the cause of the son's eventual death:

I can hardly doubt, however, that [Charley] inherited a strain of madness from his father, a madness which that father had developed by forcing upon him the false forms of a true religion.⁴⁶¹

Like honest stonemason Thomas Cramm, locked in the 'pitcher' of Calvinism, MacDonald is suggesting that the father's religion is 'true' but encased or expressed in 'false forms'. This somewhat disingenuous phrase implies that it is possible to distinguish between the content of religion and its 'form'—its outward expression. But equally—as MacDonald often argues in his sermons (and narratives such as *Phantastes*)—false forms might simply be considered the visible expression of *false* religion. I suggest this reluctance simply to denounce this misguided Protestantism as false is indicative of the continued hold of childhood faith, as well as a failure to accept that 'form' is always expressive of 'content'.

⁴⁵⁹ *Cumbermede*, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

Mr Osbourne, Charley's father, haunts the narrative like an evil spirit, coming between him and divine revelation. On the journey to start their schooling in Switzerland, Cumbermede notes that the father was 'ever blocking up our horizon, whether he sat with his broad back in front of us on the coach-box, or paced the deck of a vessel, or perched with us under the hood on the top of a diligence'.⁴⁶² The damage wrought on Charley's young mind through his father's psychological abuse is extensive—abuse which continues into adulthood as the son, now a lawyer, continues to suffer domination and criticism. He is not even allowed home without his father being there: 'He does not wish me to be there without his presence to counteract my evil influences. He seems to regard my mere proximity as dangerous.' Stressing once more that the root of madness is religion, Charley continues: 'I sometimes wonder whether the severity of his religion may not have affected his mind.'⁴⁶³ The narrator later remarks: 'It is a terrible thing when the father is the cloud, and not the sun, of his child's life.'⁴⁶⁴ It is Charley's father, not Charley himself, who is held responsible for the latter's suicide as a result of having corrupted Christianity—of having 'brand[ed] the truth of the kingdom with the private mark of opinion'.⁴⁶⁵ If the father had truly loved his son:

Doubtless, if in the mind so sadly unhinged, the sense of a holy presence could be developed—the sense of a love that loves through all vagaries—of a hiding-place from forms of evil the most fantastic—of a fatherly care that not only holds its insane child in its arms, but enters into the chaos of his imagination, and sees every wildest horror with which it swarms; if, I say, the conviction of such a love dawned on the disordered mind, the man would live in spite of his imaginary foes.⁴⁶⁶

The message is that God, the perfect father, is the shelter for an otherwise insane humanity, the place of refuge, healing, and identity. Cumbermede finds this refuge by centring himself in the self that is 'everlasting eternal giving'.⁴⁶⁷ His friend is denied the opportunity.

Doubt, in this convincing sketch of depression and suicide, rather than being a positive catalyst for faith, produces despair. Even Cumbermede confesses that he had contemplated sui-

⁴⁶² Ibid., p. 133.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., p. 292.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 456.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 447.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 483; cf. Matt. 16.25.

cide.⁴⁶⁸ All characters have mental issues, particularly Charley whose dysfunctional mind is unable to access the healing power of nature, unable to see light beyond the darkness. When visiting a glacial ice cave, for example, whereas Cumbermede rejoices in the numinous aestheticism of the blue, seemingly infinite light analogous to an encounter with God, Charley cannot cope. For him it is an encounter with death:

‘O Charley!’ I exclaimed, looking round in my transport for sympathy. It was now my turn to cry out, for Charley’s face was that of a corpse.

[...]

‘It’s an awful place, Wilfrid. I don’t like it. Don’t go in again. I should stand waiting to see you come out in a winding-sheet. I think there’s something wrong with my brain. [...] I see everything horribly dead.’⁴⁶⁹

This scene dramatizes MacDonald’s insistence that for God to condemn the mentally disturbed, those unable to respond positively to God in this life, is morally reprehensible:

[T]he notion that a creature born imperfect, nay, born with impulses to evil not of his own generating, and which he could not help having, a creature to whom the true face of God was never presented, and by whom it never could have been seen, should be thus condemned, is as loathsome a lie against God as could find place in heart too undeveloped to understand what justice is, and too low to look up into the face of Jesus.⁴⁷⁰

Post-mortem salvation must be a *possibility* if human free will is to make any sense. It is an *inevitability* if the loss of a soul amounts to defeat for God, that is, that for God to destroy the ‘streams of life’ flowing from Godself—such as the incapacitated Charley—equates not to the defeat of evil, but the destruction of something of the essence of God, for ‘[i]s he not defeated every time that one of those lost souls defies him?’⁴⁷¹

This narrative, therefore, questions the nature of reality. If what humans conceive as reality is a mental construct, what hope do humans have of finding truth when their minds distort and misinterpret received cues? Even when Cumbermede has a ‘spiritual’ encounter, he questions its validity:

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 475. His sketches of depression are sometimes chilling, reflecting, it seems, personal experience. Raepel notes that ‘MacDonald plummeted into depression during his university years from which it took an anxious time of searching and effort to emerge’ (*GM*, p. 237).

⁴⁶⁹ *Cumbermede*, p. 142.

⁴⁷⁰ *US3*, p. 126.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., p. 125.

I fear to build any definite conclusions upon it, from the dread of fanaticism and the danger of attributing a merely physical effect to a spiritual cause. But are matter and spirit so far asunder?⁴⁷²

We will consider the latter ontological question in due course. Here, with certain parallels with Murdoch Malison, MacDonald questions the character of God through the character of Charley Osbourne. If Mr Osbourne senior—a man who ‘puts the evil foremost in his creed and exhortations’—genuinely worships God, the implication is that God is either evil, or ‘very indifferent to what his creatures think of him’.⁴⁷³

The theological principles offered here are that God ‘will not force himself on [people], but help them to grow into the true knowledge of him’, and that those who claim to worship the true God may ‘have only a little of that knowledge’.⁴⁷⁴ However, in MacDonald’s view, God is continually orchestrating events to draw people to God:

I do not believe we notice half of the coincidences that float past us on the stream of events. Things which would fill us with astonishment, and probably with foreboding, look us in the face and pass us by, and we know nothing of them.⁴⁷⁵

Humanity is thus culpable, through negligence, of failing to discern truth. Charley, however, illustrates that this trite response is inadequate. In his case, the sins of the father are being visited on the child; however willing, he is mentally unable to decode the cues from either God or nature.

Having conceded—at least theoretically—that his father *might* possibly have some good in him, he and Wilfred observe one of nature’s cues, a beautiful moonlit evening:

‘I wish I could let it into me, Wilfrid,’ said Charley [...].

‘Let what into you, Charley?’

‘The night and the blue and the stars.’

‘Why don’t you, then?’

*‘I hate being taken in. The more pleasant a self-deception, the less I choose to submit to it.’*⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² *Cumbermede*, pp. 146–47. I believe this should read: ‘attributing to a merely physical effect a spiritual cause’.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 296 (emphasis mine).

The blue of the night, like the blue light in the ice cave of childhood, represents the infinite presence of God—a presence inaccessible to the mentally disturbed Charley. While conceding that God *might* be behind the beauty of nature, his fear of deception rejects this possibility. Even in adulthood the father's hold is strong, a father who had told him 'that the love of nature is not only a delusion, but a snare'. Charley summarises: 'Of all miseries—to believe in a lovely thing and find it not true—that must be the worst.'⁴⁷⁷

Charley's suicide is precipitated by an unfortunate coincidence (seeing his beloved innocently kiss his best friend, which he interprets as her rejection of him) which—since MacDonald insists that events are orchestrated by God—means that God, as well as the father, is culpable. The logic of this can only be reconciled by MacDonald's rejection of 'the tree lies where it falls' theology.⁴⁷⁸

That my Charley, whose suicide came of misery that the painful flutterings of his half-born wings would not bear him aloft into the empyrean, should appear to my Athanasia [his beloved] lost in an abyss of irrecoverable woe; that she should think of God as sending forth his spirit to sustain endless wickedness for endless torture;—it was too frightful.⁴⁷⁹

Suicide has, instead, ushered the disturbed man into God's presence. Although buried in unconsecrated ground, Cumbermede observes that:

I saw the body of Charley laid in the holy earth. For the earth *is* the Lord's—and none the less holy that the voice of the priest may have left it without his consecration. Surely if ever the Lord laughs in derision, as the Psalmist says, it must be when the voice of a man would in *his* name exclude his fellows from their birthright.⁴⁸⁰

And, speaking through the voice of Cumbermede, MacDonald has to conclude that, ultimately, one may rejoice over suicide:

When the crystal shrine has grown dim, and the fair forms of nature [...] are contorted hideously [by the tormented mind ...;] when the body is no longer a mediator between the soul and the

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 298–99.

⁴⁷⁸ Maurice had also declaimed: 'This cannot be Protestantism. Cannot be Christianity' (*Theological Essays*, p. 442).

⁴⁷⁹ *Cumbermede*, p. 451.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 448.

world, but the prison-house of a lying gaoler and torturer—how can I but rejoice to hear that the tormented captive has at length forced his way out into freedom?⁴⁸¹

This narrative illustrates the thesis that childlike obedience to perceived truth, however mistaken, is of more value to God than belief which does not lead to obedience. For the mentally ill, perception is necessarily skewed, but *all* are, to some extent, ‘lunatics’ for, as *Cumbermede*’s confession above shows, even he has been deluded about his worship which now he realises to be that of self. It leads to the question: ‘who can tell how often this may be the fact—how often the lunatic also lives by faith?’⁴⁸² This is a question explored, for example, in the characters of the mad laird in *Malcolm*, or the ‘fool’ in *The Wow O’ Rivven*,⁴⁸³ individuals who exhibit more faith than most and find post-mortem rest in the arms of a loving God. As Hans Urs von Balthasar remarks:

there is a gleam of unconscious, unintended sanctity about the real fool. He is the unprotected man, essentially transcendent, open to what is above him [...]. Since he is never quite ‘in his right mind’, never quite ‘all there’, he lacks the ponderousness that would tie him down to earth. He stands nearest to the saint, often nearer than the morally successful man preoccupied with his perfection.⁴⁸⁴

It is a narrative that blurs the distinction between wilfulness and weakness: is Mr Osbourne senior, for example, culpable or simply deluded?

This narrative therefore rejects any simplistic notion of post-mortem judgement, relying instead on a purgatorial entrance to the afterlife. It is an extension of MacDonald’s belief that all evil is ultimately used by God for good: like Truffy’s abuse, Charley’s illness after the ice-cave incident results in him being ‘more cheerful than [...] before’ and him ‘grow[ing] a good deal’.⁴⁸⁵ Suffering is the rain of God that creates springs in the human heart.⁴⁸⁶ It is the only way

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ A short story in *The Portent and Other Stories*.

⁴⁸⁴ *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 143. Von Balthasar quotes Erasmus: ‘It seems to me that the Christian religion taken all together has a certain affinity with some sort of folly’ (ibid., p. 168).

⁴⁸⁵ *Cumbermede*, p. 143. Charley’s sister is also transformed by his suicide: ‘suffering had removed some substance unapt, and rendered her body a better-fitting garment for her soul’ (ibid., p. 460).

⁴⁸⁶ *Castle Warlock* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., [1895(?)]), pp. 106-07.

he can reconcile the evil he sees in the created order with the belief in God as ‘the causing goodness’.⁴⁸⁷

Finally, the focus here is almost exclusively on nature as being God’s vehicle for communication to humanity. The Bible, like nature, is primarily considered as a book for ‘the rousing of a man’s conscience’ rather than imparting any concrete information,⁴⁸⁸ and nature itself is seen as the main influence in Cumbermede’s awareness of God:

The fact is I was coming in for my share in the spiritual influences of Nature, so largely poured on the heart and mind of my generation. [...] I was under the same spell as [Wordsworth and Coleridge]. Nature was a power upon me. I was filled with the vague recognition of a present soul in Nature.⁴⁸⁹

4.4 A realist fairyland

An immediate judgement as to which of these narratives is the more realist might favour *Cumbermede*: it appears to offer a more ‘real’ (and depressing) world. However, on reflection it is evident that whether innocent or disturbed, MacDonald’s children inhabit the same world—a fantasy world. In my view, Lewis was right to suggest that the opening chapters of *Cumbermede* are especially ‘fantastic’:⁴⁹⁰ one feels that the tale is more like a dream (or a nightmare) than a picture of reality. But equally, Gibbie’s pastoral Eden—where honest (male) peasants read poetry to each other and play pan-pipes while submissive females dutifully listen and are instructed⁴⁹¹—is just as fantastic, and, like the art of the period, devoid of steam engines or industry.⁴⁹² Such a disconnect between lived reality and the MacDonaldian ideal led a frustrated Ruskin, who favoured ‘stern facts’, to complain:

I suppose it is quite impossible for you dear good people, who think it your duty to believe whatever you like—and to expect always to get whatever is good for you, to enter into the minds of us poor wicked people, who sternly think it our duty to believe nothing but what we know to be fact, and to expect nothing but what we’ve been used to get.⁴⁹³

⁴⁸⁷ *Cumbermede*, p. 447.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁹⁰ Note 378.

⁴⁹¹ *Gibbie*, pp. 183–84.

⁴⁹² Tim Barringer, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Orion, 1998), p. 106.

⁴⁹³ *GMAW*, p. 334.

Perhaps he had failed to appreciate that even fantasy can shed light on the nature of reality.

I have suggested also that, unlike the traditional *Bildungsroman* where the protagonist is shaped by external forces, MacDonald's innocent children achieve the opposite—it is their world, not they, who change. But this also would be a misreading: it is rather (as we will consider more fully later) an issue of perception. As we look through the eyes of these children (and those playing opposite them) we see different perspectives on an essentially idealist 'fairy' universe. Gibbie (and to a lesser extent Diamond), being the perfect *imago*, is almost unable to see or experience evil; his pure vision sees the numinous glow of nature; evil has no purchase on his innocent soul. Annie, however, is less perfect, but once the 'pitcher of Calvinism' is broken, she too is able to clearly perceive the divine glow. It is Charley's and Cumbermede's vision that is the most distorted, the former never able to see clearly, blinded as he is by, as it were, inoperable (at least in this life) religious cataracts.

All these, though, are children, or perhaps one should say firmly on the road to childhood. Even Charley is a child; he is simply a blind child, unable, for that reason, to be an obedient child, however willing. Murdoch Malison, likewise, is blind to the true nature of his abuse: it takes the ministrations of his charges to begin to open his eyes, just as Annie becomes a 'candle' to Thomas Cramm. It is a theology that stresses orientation rather than position or status: that those who turn in God's direction are on the road to salvation, not those who claim to be 'elect' or 'convertit'. It is 'adults' such as shopkeeper Robert Bruce (who becomes an elder in the Missionar-kirk for business reasons), or the zealot Mr Osbourne—those of whom Jesus said, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, "We see." Therefore your sin remains'⁴⁹⁴—who will experience the full force of God's purgatorial fire.

In these fantasy worlds, evil is also considered primarily a matter of perception—an erroneous vision of God—and this aspect of MacDonald's theology has implications that will need to be explored more fully. We now turn to an outline of that theology.

⁴⁹⁴ Jn 9.41.

Chapter 5 An overview of George MacDonald's theology

5.1 MacDonald's view of cognition and epistemology

This chapter provides an overview of MacDonald's theology. Specific theological propositions already identified are located in a wider theological context by paying closer attention to MacDonald's direct voice in essays and letters, as well as additional narrative sources. This overview will provide the foundation for a more nuanced and critical reading of his work—especially his fantasy literature.

First, some comments regarding MacDonald's view of cognition and epistemology.

John Henry Newman wrote of MacDonald's age that it was a time when faith had become stereotyped:

Its doctrines are not so much facts, as stereotyped aspects of facts; and it is afraid, so to say, of walking around them. It induces its followers to be content with this meagre view of revealed truth.⁴⁹⁵

MacDonald, however, dissatisfied with 'meagre views of received truth' was unafraid of 'walking around them'. His is a Maurician emphasis on holistic truth (that is, 'organic' truth perceived 'symbolically')⁴⁹⁶ on the basis that truth in Christianity is fundamentally related to a person, not to propositions. 'To know' is not *savoir* but *connaître*: 'vous *connaîtrez* la vérité et la vérité vous rendra libres'.⁴⁹⁷ He, like Newman, disdained '[l]ogicians [...] more set upon concluding rightly, than on drawing right conclusions'.⁴⁹⁸ His Romantic privileging of imagination is a reaction to the perceived sterility of *conventional* faith—belief in dead concepts buried in 'graves of convention'.⁴⁹⁹ The imagination must *lead* its plodding brother, reason.⁵⁰⁰ Only imagination, he argues, can disinter faith from certain death. As noted, it puts him on a collision

⁴⁹⁵ *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oats, & Co., 1870), p. 55.

⁴⁹⁶ Page 17.

⁴⁹⁷ Jn 8.32.

⁴⁹⁸ *Grammar of Assent*, p. 91.

⁴⁹⁹ Page 180.

⁵⁰⁰ Note 60.

course with Calvin, who famously valued ‘solid enquiry’ above ‘vain speculation’⁵⁰¹—perhaps more so with Calvin’s successors for whom their master’s thought had, in like fashion, become divorced from context.⁵⁰²

There were, however, critics. In George Eliot’s view, for example, Romantics were dreamers, poor poets whose grandiloquence stemmed from ‘the want of taking for a criterion the true qualities of the object described, or the emotion expressed’, subsequently ‘float[ing] away into utter inanity without meeting any criterion to arrest [them]’.⁵⁰³ For John Ruskin, irrationality led such as MacDonald to believe that ‘the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy’s shield, or a forsaken maiden’;⁵⁰⁴ Romantics were ‘unhinged’ from reality and ‘too weak to deal fully with what is before them’—they may ‘feel strongly’ but have lost the ability to ‘think strongly’.⁵⁰⁵

How might one defend MacDonald against such charges?

The issue is cognitive approach: the ‘logician’ constructs reality based on deductive or inductive principles. MacDonald’s approach fits a third category, abduction, which recognises that many human theories about reality (and, as Newman underlined, firmly held beliefs)⁵⁰⁶ are posited on the basis of a more intuitive approach to presenting states of affairs that lead to conclusions that cannot (at least initially, often never) be formally verified, and are inevitably affected by the choice of ‘lens’ through which one looks. Without infinite *a priori* knowledge, finite individuals, of necessity, must choose a model by which to view the world, a choice which then affects what is seen. Psychologist Iain McGilchrist puts it like this:

How we think about our selves and our relationship with the world is already revealed in the metaphors we *unconsciously* choose to talk about it. That choice further entrenches our partial view of the subject. Paradoxically we seem to be obliged to understand something—including ourselves—

⁵⁰¹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2012), 1. 4. 47.

⁵⁰² A contemporary of MacDonald was less forgiving: ‘We often hear it said that Calvinists went far beyond Calvin. My own study of the question leads to a diametrically opposite conclusion. I doubt whether any of Calvin’s followers went as far as Calvin himself’ (‘The Influence of Calvinism on Modern Unbelief’, p. 335).

⁵⁰³ ‘Worldliness and Other Worldliness; the Poet Young’, *Westminster Review*, 67 (1857), 1–42 (p. 15).

⁵⁰⁴ ‘The Pathetic Fallacy’, *Modern Painters, Volume III* (London: George Routledge & Sons Limited, [1856?]), p. 173. MacDonald is guilty as charged: ‘The faces of some flowers lead me back to the heart of God’ (*US3*, p. 251); ‘To know a primrose is a higher thing than to know all the botany of it’ (*US2*, p. 196).

⁵⁰⁵ *Modern Painters, Volume III*, pp. 170, 173, 174.

⁵⁰⁶ Note 508.

well enough to choose the appropriate model before we can understand it. Our first leap determines where we land.⁵⁰⁷

It is a principle developed at length by Newman for whom ‘real assent’ to any proposition is inevitably based on a working model rather than objective facts:

let us not by our words imply that we are appealing to experience, when really we are only accounting, and that by hypothesis, for the *absence of experience*. The confusion is a fact, the reasoning processes are not facts.⁵⁰⁸

Using the term ‘abduction’, Newman’s ‘hypothesis’ was formulated by C. S. Peirce as ‘the process of forming explanatory hypotheses [...] the only logical operation which introduces any new idea’, and that abduction encompasses ‘all the operations by which theories and conceptions are engendered’.⁵⁰⁹ As a cognitive process, it *precedes* deduction or induction. The problem for Ruskin is not that MacDonald and his ‘dreaming’ friends are imaginative (in his view, imagination is ‘the source of all that is great in the poetic arts’)⁵¹⁰ but that they are presenting hypotheses that are not subsequently open to deductive or inductive verification.

MacDonald’s starting point is that God rewards the honest seeker,⁵¹¹ and his ‘lens’ is Christocentric. A childlike attitude is relevant here, for, inasmuch as divine revelation is necessarily beyond logical analysis and therefore limited (reflecting Ruskin’s conclusion that to know anything must be to know it partially),⁵¹² one has to abductively choose the ‘best fit’ to explain the presenting phenomena and trust that this is either (a) valid on the basis that God does not intentionally deceive God’s children or (b) if invalid, that this will become clear, since God is committed to leading God’s children into truth. This, in short, is MacDonald’s ‘fiduciary hermeneutic’, the choice to view the world from the perspective of faith.

The child is proposed as a model to account for the dynamics and content of the human–divine relationship; MacDonald’s fiction then explores this hypothesis in ‘real’ life. The unreality of his ‘realist’ novels is not an inability to write, rather a sense that the hypothesis does not

⁵⁰⁷ *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 97 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁰⁸ *Grammar of Assent*, p. 68 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁰⁹ Igor Douven, ‘Abduction’, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/abduction/> [accessed 15 Sep 2013].

⁵¹⁰ *Modern Painters, Volume II*, 2nd edn (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1848), p. 134 (III. II. 1. 2).

⁵¹¹ A pervading biblical theme, for example, Deut. 4.29; Prov. 8.17; Jer. 29.13; Matt. 7.7–8; Lk. 11.9–19; Acts 17.27.

⁵¹² *Modern Painters, Volume IV* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1856), pp. 58–59 (4. 4).

completely match or account for human experience—or relates to only one aspect of it. His imaginative fantasies, which have much looser moorings to perceived reality, are, for this reason, significantly more effective. (But, as David Reynolds discusses, they may be exemplary of the tendency among ‘liberal’ authors, according to their Calvinist accusers, of disguising what they really mean so that they can slip heresy under the radar.)⁵¹³

MacDonald follows Coleridge in positing that the Spirit’s drawing of the human imagination is not the result of human effort, but of divine initiative,⁵¹⁴ perhaps absolving him of the charge of Pelagianism. Grace is needed. In other words, abduction (not that Coleridge or MacDonald used the word) is not just human cognition reaching out into the void and coming up with an imaginative ‘best fit’, but is the active drawing by God of human consciousness towards Godself: it is the confidence that ‘[t]he child sees things as the Father means him to see them’.⁵¹⁵ God draws the divine ‘spark’ in humans, the imagination, back to its source. Emphasising that the concept is more than simply another form of reasoning but involves divine initiative, Daniel Hardy reflects that for Coleridge, it was “‘the being drawn towards the true center” of all, the Logos and the Spirit’.⁵¹⁶ For MacDonald, it is the ‘gravitational’ pull of the Spirit urging union with God, the fire-core of existence around which the human being orbits:

It is but that the deeper soul that willed and wills our souls, rises up, the infinite Life, into the self we call *I* and *me*, but which lives immediately from him, and is his very own property and nature—unspeakably more his than ours: this deeper creative soul, working on and with his creation upon higher levels, makes the *I* and *me* more and more his, and himself more and more ours; until at length the glory of our existence flashes upon us, we face full to the sun that enlightens what it sent forth, and know ourselves alive with an infinite life, even the life of the Father.⁵¹⁷

Daniel Hardy’s articulation of abduction seems to summarise MacDonald’s view. In both the individual life and in human social history, the Spirit is drawing humanity from beyond the horizons of cognition towards eschatological consummation, demanding that faith reach out

⁵¹³ In the American context, David Reynolds discusses Jeremiah Evarts’ view that liberals ‘generally conceal their religious opinions [in their novels ...] with particular care’ while Calvinists ‘generally avow their religious opinions with the utmost frankness’ (*Review of American Unitarianism*, Boston: Armstrong, 1815, p. 21, in *Faith in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 96–97).

⁵¹⁴ ‘It is not uncommon [...] in Coleridgean scholarship’, writes Robin Stockitt, ‘to overlook the profoundly religious nature of [Coleridge’s] definition [of the primary imagination]’ (*Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, p. 65).

⁵¹⁵ *HG*, p. 56.

⁵¹⁶ *Wording a Radiance* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p. 54, n. 2.

⁵¹⁷ *US3*, pp. 53–54.

imaginatively beyond the *known* towards the *becoming*—‘allowing our imaginations to be drawn forward by divine attraction: an ongoing process of envisioning and re-envisioning, so that we are stretched forward by the divine purposes’.⁵¹⁸ It is an iterative process that reaches for truth but never possesses it, and explains MacDonald’s suspicion of systems claiming to fully contain truth, including his own aversion to producing or subscribing to one. He makes this very clear:

We are far too anxious to be definite, & have finished, well-polished, sharp-edged systems—forgetting that the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it is to be wrong, the more impossible it is to be right. I am neither Arminian nor Calvinist—to no system could I subscribe.⁵¹⁹

He also notes: ‘Our Lord had no design of constructing a system of truth in intellectual forms.’⁵²⁰ Instead, he prefers to conceive of faith as a journey towards the infinite heart of God, reminiscent of Gregory of Nyssa’s *epektasis*, with the soul growing younger and more embracing of the fire of God with increasing proximity to the divine heart.

Finally, we note that MacDonald’s theology is primarily pastoral; he aims to lead people ‘to the living Truth, to the Master himself’.⁵²¹ He appears to have two audiences in view: those who fear, and those who despise, the ‘headmaster’ God and, whether anxious believers or informed ‘cultured despisers’, are familiar with Christianity. This is most evident in his narrow treatment of evil where the tacit assumption is made that his ‘congregation’ would like to escape from hell and (re)connect with God, and that the problem of evil is sited in human rebellion. As our narrative readings have revealed, his focus on moral evil is arguably at the expense of a broader and more adequate account. As a pastoral theologian, his main concern is to elicit personal response, not produce watertight theoretical frameworks—he wants to foster ‘children’. The emphasis on personal revelation leads to the focus on being an *obedient* child—obedient to truth as perceived. If that perception is flawed, he argues—reflecting the comments above regarding the iterative nature of revelation—God will soon, through obedience, lead his child

⁵¹⁸ *Wording a Radiance*, p. 77.

⁵¹⁹ ‘To His Father’, Arundel, April 15th 1851, in *Letters GM*, p. 51.

⁵²⁰ *US1*, p. 66.

⁵²¹ *US3*, pp. 155–56.

back to the right path.⁵²² ‘Faith’, he insists, ‘can have no existence except in obedience’,⁵²³ ‘[o]bedience is the soul of knowledge’.⁵²⁴

We now turn to a summary MacDonald’s theology.

5.2 Doctrine of God

The title of Jesus’s discourse about the child, and that of MacDonald’s first *Unspoken Sermon*, sums up MacDonald’s doctrine of God: God is both ‘a child’ and ‘in the midst’. We begin with the latter.

5.2 (a) The central fire of God—creating and consuming

God, for MacDonald, is absolute Being, the ‘fire-core of the universe’⁵²⁵ that is both creative and destructive, heaven and hell. It is a Behmenist vision of creation *emanating* from God, but God is also the ‘*consuming* fire which is essential love’,⁵²⁶ sustaining what is good and consuming evil. God is hell: ‘It is a fearful thing to fall [unworthily] into the hands of the living God.’⁵²⁷ As David Bentley Hart writes, from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, ‘the kingdom is also an event of discrimination, a condemnation of all the falsehoods that enslave creation. The kingdom wears the aspect of damnation, as well as redemption, and the language of hell enters Christian discourse alongside the evangel of peace.’

Hart continues:

Hell is with us at all times, a phantom kingdom perpetuating itself in the wastes of sinful hearts, but only becomes visible to us as hell because the true kingdom has shed its light upon history. In theological tradition, most particularly in the East, there is that school of thought that wisely makes no distinction, essentially, between the fire of hell and the light of God’s glory, and that interprets damnation as the soul’s resistance to the beauty of God’s glory.⁵²⁸

From a Western perspective, Hans Urs von Balthasar concurs: for an unrepentant sinner, ‘the fiery torrent of eternal love that flows around and through him would remain a torrent of

⁵²² *US1*, p. 56; *US2*, p. 212.

⁵²³ *US2*, p. 247.

⁵²⁴ *HG*, p. 18.

⁵²⁵ *US2*, p. 166; MacDonald’s emphasis here is Christ’s risen glory (Mk 9:3 and Rev. 1:14–16).

⁵²⁶ *US1*, p. 30 (emphasis mine).

⁵²⁷ Heb. 10:31.

⁵²⁸ *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 399.

eternal wrath'.⁵²⁹ This is MacDonald's view. Thus evil 'alone is consumable',⁵³⁰ and, in a phrase rejecting popular ideas of hell, remarks: 'Death alone can die everlastingly'. This comment is made in *Alec Forbes* as spring begins to thaw winter's chill. When God shines fully in the spring of the eschaton, evil will finally end:

[T]he winter, old and weary, was halting away before the sweet approaches of the spring—a symbol of that eternal spring before whose slow footsteps Death itself, "the winter of our discontent," shall vanish. Death alone can die everlastingly.⁵³¹

This divine emanation is not impersonal power or an involuntary 'shining': it is an aesthetic model that views creation as God's willed artwork, 'an expression of the thought, the feeling, the heart of God himself',⁵³² or, as he put it to his future wife: 'The beautiful things round about you are the expression of God's face [...] the garment whereby we see the deity.'⁵³³ It is a rejection of the Newtonian universe with its absentee God: 'This world is not merely a thing which God hath made, subjecting it to laws.'⁵³⁴ Instead, God is intimately present in all God has made (which begs the question how we account for the things that are *not* beautiful, something which will be considered later).

With God, creative thoughts are synonymous with creative acts, thus creation is the 'boundless free giving of the original Thought'.⁵³⁵ It is a panentheistic cosmology; that is, creation emanates from, and is sustained by, God: God is fully invested and present in creation but creation does not equate to God (pantheism). Our reality is not, as it were, the sum of God's thoughts: there exists a realm *behind* the 'back of the north wind' to which humans have no access at present; that realm is God's infinite being, the final consummate destiny of all creation.⁵³⁶ The glacial ice-cave in *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, where 'streams, ever creeping into the day of vision from the unlike and the unknown, unrolling themselves like the fronds of a fern out of

⁵²⁹ *Theo-Drama*, 5 vols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), IV, p. 350.

⁵³⁰ *USI*, p. 31.

⁵³¹ *AF*, I, p. 266.

⁵³² *Orts*, p. 246.

⁵³³ *Letters GM*, pp. 27–28.

⁵³⁴ *Orts*, p. 246.

⁵³⁵ *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* (London: Hurst & Blacket, 1876; Eureka, CA: Sunrise, 1988), p. 494.

⁵³⁶ MacDonald's ontology will become clearer when we read *Lilith* in Chapters 7 and 8.

the infinite of God', illustrates this.⁵³⁷ The picture is of a fractal reality emerging from a profound divine source, the implication being that beyond the visible world with its door of death, the infinite and eternal being of God is—if God should permit—inviting further encounter.

Rather than speculate ontologically,⁵³⁸ MacDonald emphasises that practically, 'in him we live and move and have our being':

Do you not believe [...] that there is all about us, and in us, an infinite thought; that the atmosphere in which we live and breathe [...] is thought, and that thought is the thought of One, and that One is the thought whence we came—that is, the thinking God, thinking always?⁵³⁹

It is an idealist theocentric model. Human selfhood is entirely generated and sustained by God: 'God thinks you out of himself, and you live because he lives; you have no independent existence at all',⁵⁴⁰ a phrase which at first sight appears to deny the divine gift of autonomous selfhood.

MacDonald, however, insists that free will is genuine. Selfhood may existentially be fully dependent on God's sustenance, but this does not imply determinism. Human being is conceived as God, who is at the moral gravitational centre of this universe, allowing God's 'thoughts' to think for themselves: that from a remote orbit of gravitational weakness, human will has the power to choose to return to the heart of love, or, in rejecting that love, experience the hell of 'outer darkness' where the fire of God is most destructive:

The fire of God, which is his essential being, his love, his creative power, is a fire unlike its earthly symbol in this, that it is only at a distance it burns—that the farther from him, it burns the worse, and that when we turn and begin to approach him, the burning begins to change to comfort, which comfort will grow to such bliss that the heart at length cries out with a gladness no other gladness can reach.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁷ *Cumbermede*, p. 142 (see page 106).

⁵³⁸ It appears to be a Kantian idealism where 'appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only, not things-in-themselves, and that time and space are therefore only sensible forms of our intuition, not determinations given as existing by themselves, not conditions of objects viewed as things-in-themselves' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. by Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 387).

⁵³⁹ *God's Words to His Children* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1887), p. 3; cf. Acts 17.28.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁴¹ *US2*, p. 162.

‘God has, as it were,’ he summarises, ‘put us just so far away from Him that we can exercise *the divine thing in us, our own will*, in returning towards our source.’⁵⁴²

That God’s power is essentially love is a refusal of the sadistic schoolmaster God of the Reformers: who ‘yield the idea of the Ancient of Days, “the glad creator,” and put in its stead a miserable, puritanical martinet of a God’. It is in this context that MacDonald turns with loathing ‘[f]rom all copies of Jonathan Edwards’s portrait of God’⁵⁴³ (perhaps having read ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’), a comment that particularly irks contemporary neo-Reformed critics John Piper and Timothy Keller who conclude that MacDonald is ‘not really a Christian’.⁵⁴⁴

5.2 (b) The divine father–child: ‘To us a God, to himself a child’⁵⁴⁵

The image of God as power (albeit loving) is contrasted with God’s kenotic choice to be powerless, central to which is the image of the divine father–child relationship. Expounding ‘The Child in the Midst’, MacDonald begins by emphasising that God is not ‘childish’, but ‘child-like’:

One of the saddest and not least common sights in the world is the face of a child whose mind is so brimful of worldly wisdom that the human childishness has vanished from it, as well as the divine childlikeness. For the *childlike* is the divine, and the very word “marshals me the way that I was going.”⁵⁴⁶

Jesus chose an ordinary child because he was drawing attention to something essential in childhood which we are to emulate: ‘the essential childhood was meant, and not a blurred and half-obliterated childhood’.⁵⁴⁷ That essence is not innocence, but divine childlikeness, ‘spiritual childhood’: the welcome of the child ‘in my name’ does not merely mean ‘because I will it’ but ‘means *as representing me*; and, therefore, *as being like me*’. He continues:

⁵⁴² George MacDonald, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (London: Strahan & Co., 1870), p. 54 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁴³ *US3*, pp. 161–62.

⁵⁴⁴ Ron Dart, ‘Would We Have Been Friends?: Piper/Keller Contra Lewis/MacDonald’, *Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice*, (2015) <http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2015/04/would-we-have-been-friends-piperkeller-contra-lewis-macdonald-by-ron-dart.html> [accessed 12 July 2015].

⁵⁴⁵ Novalis, ‘Song XII’, *Rampolli*, p. 34.

⁵⁴⁶ *US1*, p. 3. The quote is from *Macbeth*, II. 1.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

In my name [...] involves a revelation from resemblance, from fitness to represent and so reveal. He who receives a child, then, in the name of Jesus, does so, perceiving wherein Jesus and the child are one, what is common to them.⁵⁴⁸

The common denominator between child, Son, and Father is childlikeness.

A reasonable objection to this argument is that what is endearing in a child might not be so attractive in a God.⁵⁴⁹ one may accept that a child carries the *imago Dei*, but this does not imply that all childhood characteristics (such as throwing tantrums) can be found in God. But MacDonald is not suggesting this; he is simply insisting that since Christ identified with a child, the latter must, in some fundamental sense, represent the deity in whose image it is made.

The point is that in the context of a discourse about power (which disciple would be the greatest in the kingdom) the use of a child is significant, for a child knows, deep down, that it does not rule in an adult world. God, likewise, is ‘powerless’—a child—which leads to a concise articulation of his doctrine of God:

For it is his childlikeness that makes him our God and Father. The perfection of his relation to us swallows up all our imperfections, all our defects, all our evils; for *our childhood is born of his fatherhood*.⁵⁵⁰

That God is a powerless child is not so much a divine choice as an expression of the divine nature: perfect love never coerces; that ‘perfection of relation’ that ‘swallows our imperfections’ is love; the ‘fire-core’ is ‘love [...] a radiant perfection. Love and not self-love is lord of the universe’.⁵⁵¹ Here the (divine) child is father to the man and the *imago Dei* is, above all else, the image of the childlike God.

This loving ‘relation of the Father and the Son contains the *idea of the universe*. [...] The child-relation is the one eternal, ever enduring, never changing relation.’⁵⁵² It is the hallmark of a reality where individual identity can only be found in relationship with the divine other, and where human identity is only real if it reflects the divine purpose—the divine *idea*. ‘The child’ is, therefore, a metaphor which does not simply speak of submissiveness (or any other specific

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 10–11.

⁵⁴⁹ *The Theology of Modern Literature*, p. 294.

⁵⁵⁰ *US1*, pp. 24–25 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁵¹ *US3*, p. 132.

⁵⁵² *HG*, p. 161 (emphasis mine).

attribute) but one which is at the root of reality because it is intrinsic to the nature of the triune God.

MacDonald's view of the Trinity, however, reflects the nineteenth century Western tendency to speak of the Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son and this, as Hart observes, can 'give the appearance that the Spirit is not as irreducibly "personal" as Father and Son'.⁵⁵³ This is reflected in MacDonald's preference for the term 'Spirit of Christ'⁵⁵⁴ rather than Holy Spirit. He encourages openness to the Spirit, writing, for example, that 'God gives the spirit of his son, the spirit of himself, to be in him [who is obedient], and lead him to the understanding of all truth',⁵⁵⁵ and laments the lack of awareness of the Spirit in the church, but he is very much the sort of a philosophical idealist that regards reality as primarily a mental construction: in his view, the Spirit is God's 'mind' or the 'mind of Christ' that the child may share.⁵⁵⁶

Despite this period leaning towards dualist terminology, MacDonald, by placing this 'idea of the universe' at the heart of his theology, is stressing the mutual love within the Trinity which Hart terms the 'triune coinherence' of God, at the heart of which is perichoretic joy; a dance as each 'person' of the Trinity rejoices in, and affirms, the 'others'. The implication, according to Hart, is that each 'person' of the Trinity necessarily embraces the 'others' such that, for example, 'The Father's entire being, which he possesses in his paternal depth, is always also both filial [...] and spiritual.' It is this insight which, I believe, MacDonald is expressing: that humans are made in the image of a deity who is essentially relational and *filial*.

5.2 (c) Christology

The filiality of the Father is reciprocated by the Son being the perfect *imago*.⁵⁵⁷

He has never lost his childhood, the very essence of childhood being nearness to the Father and the outgoing of his creative love; whence, with that insight of his eternal childhood of which the insight of the little ones here is a fainter repetition, he must see everywhere as the Father means it.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵³ *Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 175.

⁵⁵⁴ Rom. 8.9; Phil. 1.19; 1 Pet. 1.11.

⁵⁵⁵ *US3*, p. 155.

⁵⁵⁶ *US1*, p. 54.

⁵⁵⁷ Jn 14.9.

⁵⁵⁸ *HG*, pp. 55–56.

Jesus perfectly reflects the childhood and the light of the Father,⁵⁵⁹ in contrast, for example, to the moral separation implied by Scottish divine Samuel Rutherford, for whom ‘[t]he Lord the Creditor, and Christ the Cautioner did strike hands together’,⁵⁶⁰ the one taking unilateral action to satisfy the other. Father and Son are not morally divided: soteriological schemes that imply the Son must protect humans from the wrath of the Father are false.⁵⁶¹

MacDonald, like Karl Barth, views Christ as the only perfect *imago Dei*.⁵⁶² Humans are a ‘fainter repetition’ of ‘his eternal childhood’, ‘little child Gods’:

For the finite that dwells in the infinite, and in which the infinite dwells, is finite no longer. *Those who are thus children indeed, are little Gods*, the divine brood of the infinite Father.⁵⁶³

‘The Word’, MacDonald insists, ‘is that by which we live, namely, Jesus himself’;⁵⁶⁴ the Bible is not the Word of God but *a* word of God.⁵⁶⁵ Iain McGilchrist wryly notes that in the Reformation ‘the Flesh is made Word’;⁵⁶⁶ in MacDonald’s words: ‘All reading of the Book is not reading of the Word.’⁵⁶⁷ Personal revelation is both valid and necessary; ‘[t]he Word is the Lord’:

Every man must read the Word for himself. One may read it in one shape, another in another: all will be right if it be indeed the Word they read, and they read it by the lamp of obedience. He who is willing to do the will of the Father shall know the truth of the teaching of Jesus. The spirit is ‘given to them that obey him.’⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁵⁹ Jn 1.4–5, 18; 1 Jn 1.5.

⁵⁶⁰ From Rutherford’s *The Covenant Life* (1655) in *Scottish Theology*, p. 98.

⁵⁶¹ ‘Justice’, *US3*.

⁵⁶² Karl Barth, ‘The Doctrine of Creation’, in *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1960), III (II), pp. 231–42.

⁵⁶³ *HG*, p. 66 (emphasis mine). In a letter he writes: ‘One moment’s contact between his heart and his child’s makes of that child a young God. “I said ye are Gods.”’ (*Letters GM*, p. 305); Ps. 82.6, cf. ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet. 1.4).

⁵⁶⁴ *US1*, p. 118.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁵⁶⁶ *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 323.

⁵⁶⁷ *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co, Ltd., [1890(?)]), p. 127.

⁵⁶⁸ *US3*, p. 167; reference is to Acts 5.32.

Obedience results in, not from, the filling of the Spirit. MacDonald is probably thinking of John's words (also A. J. Scott's epitaph): 'If any man will do His Will, he shall know of the doctrine'⁵⁶⁹—a text explicitly linked to imaginative discipleship:

As he that is willing to do the will of the Father, shall know of the doctrine, so, we doubt not, he that will do the will of THE POET, shall behold the Beautiful.⁵⁷⁰

The Johannine priority for the child to 'obey his commands' is a ubiquitous theme constantly reminding his readers to *act* on the truth; that 'faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead'.⁵⁷¹ The starting point is Christ's example: Christ came 'clothed in the garb of humanity, the armour that can be pierced, to take all the consequences of being the *god of obedience* among the children of disobedience'.⁵⁷² Christ not only demands, but perfectly demonstrates the self-denying, other-affirming, perichoretic 'dance' of the Trinity: obedience is not a duty to be commanded, but a response of love. Expanding on the notion that Christ came 'clothed in the garb of humanity' rather than becoming human, he writes:

He took on him the form of man: he was man already. And he was, is, and ever shall be divinely childlike. He could never have been a child if he would ever have ceased to be a child, for in him the transient found nothing. *Childhood belongs to the divine nature. Obedience, then, is as divine as Will, Service as divine as Rule.*⁵⁷³

Christ's incarnation, his earthly 'childhood', therefore, expressed his eternal childhood. In particular, childlike obedience is set over against notions of power and control—'empire': 'It was empire he rejected when he ordered Satan behind him like a dog to his heel.'⁵⁷⁴

5.2 (d) The 'morality' of God

MacDonald's theodicy refutes Calvin's voluntarist position, that 'everything which [God] wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of his willing it'⁵⁷⁵—such as choosing some for damnation. This assertion *in se* cannot be refuted for God is 'constrained' by God's own good-

⁵⁶⁹ Joseph Johnson, *George MacDonald* (London: Pitman, 1906), p. 31; Jn 7.17 (KJV). See also *Falconer*, p. 19.

⁵⁷⁰ *Orts*, p. 36.

⁵⁷¹ Jas 2.17.

⁵⁷² *Thomas Wingfold*, p. 228 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁷³ *US1*, p. 19 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁷⁴ *US3*, p. 99.

⁵⁷⁵ *Institutes*, III. 23. 2. Calvin denied being a voluntarist, but evidence points to the contrary. (Dennis Richard Danielson, *Milton's Good God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 69.)

ness, but problems arise when God's actions violate the human understanding of moral rectitude, begging the question as to whether God and humanity share the same moral 'space'—a question that arose when we considered the apparent moral schizophrenia of schoolmaster Murdoch Malison.⁵⁷⁶

To give a recent example, John Piper believes (citing Matt. 24.46 and Rev. 14.11) that 'judgment is not remedial or temporary but punitive and everlasting' (views rejected by F. D. Maurice that led to his expulsion from his Chair at King's College London in 1854). In this 'light' he considers the fate of his three sons, concluding in voluntarist tones:

But I am not ignorant that God may not have chosen my sons for his sons. And—, though I think I would give my life for their salvation, if they should be lost to me, I would not rail against the Almighty. He is God. I am but a man. The potter has absolute rights over the clay. Mine is to bow before his unimpeachable character and believe that the Judge of all the earth has ever and always will do right.⁵⁷⁷

MacDonald, agreeing with Spencer's polemic against similar glosses in his time on the 'unimpeachable character' which tortures eternally,⁵⁷⁸ describes it as 'paganism':

One of my earliest recollections is of beginning to be at strife with the false system here assailed. Such paganism I scorn as heartily in the name of Christ, as I scorn it in the name of righteousness.⁵⁷⁹

Such views are 'an insult' to God, and 'a dishonour to his creature, to hold concerning him' and to believe that those like Charley in *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, who may have had little chance in this life to 'accept Christ', are forever damned—

is as loathsome a lie against God as could find place in heart too undeveloped to understand what justice is, and too low to look up into the face of Jesus. It never in truth found place in any heart, though in many a pettifogging brain. There is but one thing lower than deliberately to believe such a lie, and that is to worship the God of whom it is believed.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁶ See page 98.

⁵⁷⁷ John Piper, 'How Does a Sovereign God Love? A Reply to Thomas Talbott', <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/how-does-a-sovereign-god-love> [accessed 24 Jun 2013]. Such views tend to be expressed by those who are sure it does not apply to themselves.

⁵⁷⁸ See page 11.

⁵⁷⁹ *US2*, p. 235.

⁵⁸⁰ *US3*, p. 126.

The lines here are clearly drawn. MacDonald holds that, since all being—including hell—is sustained by God, all morality is ‘in’ God: apparent anomalies must be down to the limitations of human perspective. But whereas Piper is prepared to accept a discontinuous morality, MacDonald is not. He argues that God and humanity must be morally alike—not in terms of scope or application, but certainly in terms of ethical norms:

To say that what our deepest conscience calls darkness may be light to God, is blasphemy; to say light in God and light in man are of differing kinds, is to speak against the spirit of light.⁵⁸¹

This issue is exemplified by Piper’s focus on the potter/clay duality, an analogy which stresses not only the otherness of God but could be read as absolute *unlikeness* (reminiscent of Chesterton’s remark regarding the futility of comparing a hare with an isosceles triangle).⁵⁸² MacDonald, in contrast, recognising that at some level we are made in the image of God (that the materials the potter works with are not simply unlike and inert) argues that likeness includes moral values:

To say on the authority of the Bible that God does a thing no honourable man would do, is to lie against God; to say that it is therefore right, is to lie against the very spirit of God. To uphold a lie for God’s sake is to be against God, not for him. God cannot be lied for. He is the truth. The truth alone is on his side.⁵⁸³

Moral confusion stems from a lack of childlike vision. Discussing Jesus’s contrast of the ‘wise and prudent’ with ‘babes’⁵⁸⁴ he argues that the former, with their myopic preoccupation with self-preservation, are unable to perceive the truth of the kingdom: ‘in proportion to our care about our own well-being, is our incapability of understanding and welcoming the care of the Father’.⁵⁸⁵ He observes, in a criticism that would certainly apply to the zealous father of Charley Osbourne, that:

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁸² *Heretics* (London: The Bodley Head, 1905), p. 76.

⁵⁸³ *US3*, pp. 116–17.

⁵⁸⁴ Matt. 11.25–27.

⁵⁸⁵ *HG*, p. 154.

All those evil doctrines about God that work misery and madness, have their origin in the brains of the wise and prudent, not in the hearts of the children.⁵⁸⁶

It is not wisdom *per se* that is objected to, but the danger that it separates ‘babe’ from Father, especially if wielded by those claiming the institutional authority of church or synagogue. ‘Terribly has his gospel suffered in the mouths of the wise and prudent.’⁵⁸⁷ In contrast, the ‘Romantic’ child is uncorrupted by culture:

The Father, then, revealed his things to babes, because the babes were his own little ones, uncorrupted by the wisdom or the care of this world, and therefore able to receive them.⁵⁸⁸

Still trailing clouds of glory, the child intuitively understands ‘a little how things go in the presence of their father in heaven, and thereby to interpret the words of the Son’.⁵⁸⁹ In this innocent state, children understand the morality of heaven:

The babes were the prophets in heaven, and the angels were glad to find it was to be so upon the earth also; they rejoiced to see that what was bound in heaven, was bound on earth; that the same principle held in each.⁵⁹⁰

It is the world’s distorted morality which gives rise to ‘one dull miserable human system after another usurping [the gospel’s] place’.⁵⁹¹ God and humans share the same moral space; to punish eternally is as morally wrong in heaven as on earth. Only the child understands the moral implications of the pervading ‘ideal relation’ of Father to Son at the heart of reality:

No wisdom of the wise can find out God; no words of the God-loving can reveal him. The simplicity of the whole natural relation is too deep for the philosopher. The Son alone can reveal God; *the child alone understand him*.⁵⁹²

5.2 (e) The justice and mercy of God

MacDonald’s aim was to dismantle the ‘dull miserable human system’ constructed by ‘the wise and prudent’ based on the Westminster Confession. Calvin, for example—having insisted that

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 155.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 158.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., p. 157.

⁵⁹² Ibid., p. 163 (emphasis mine).

‘[g]uilt is from nature’ and having Christian parents was no antidote for ‘the primary and universal curse’ affecting children’s lives⁵⁹³—inspired Samuel Rutherford. His was a ruthlessly forensic approach to faith and view of God as harsh law-giver.⁵⁹⁴ Infants would go to hell on the grounds that ‘being without the Covenant [they] cannot be chosen and predestinate in Christ to salvation’.⁵⁹⁵ As T. F. Torrance observes, Scottish voices such as Rutherford’s played a significant role in drafting the Confession, a document with a ‘very legalistic and constitutional character in which theological statements were formalised at times with an almost “frigidly logical definition”’⁵⁹⁶ that would result in ‘persistent problems’ for Scottish theology.⁵⁹⁷ Torrance observes that Rutherford’s nineteenth century successors, such as George Hill, were equally forensic, labelling the latter’s theology as ‘methodologically erroneous and inadequate [and] strictly not a fully *Christian* doctrine of God’.⁵⁹⁸

Kirk intransigence—putting the Confession above the Bible⁵⁹⁹—led to John McLeod Campbell’s dismissal.⁶⁰⁰ Erskine of Linlathen considered it:

[the] cast[ing] out from the Church of his fathers one of the saintliest of her sons. [...] He never ceased to regard it as the stoning by the Church of Scotland of her best prophet, the deliberate rejection of the highest light vouchsafed to her in his time.⁶⁰¹

Torrance identifies the main issue:

The question had to be asked, therefore [...] *what kind of God does this imply?* That was the great question with which the General Assembly was faced in 1830, with McLeod Campbell’s revolt against the idea of God that lay behind the doctrine of predestination and limited atonement in what George Hill regularly referred to as ‘the Calvinistic System’ that prevailed in the Kirk.⁶⁰²

⁵⁹³ *Institutes*, II. 1. 7.

⁵⁹⁴ *Scottish Theology*, p. 99.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129 (quote is from A. F. Mitchell, *Catechisms of the Second Reformation*).

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵⁹⁹ ‘Unworthy of the Dignity of the Assembly: The Deposition of Alexander John Scott in 1831’, pp. 251–53.

⁶⁰⁰ See page 9. The vote in the General Assembly on 24 May 1831 went 119 to 6 against Campbell. (*Ibid.*, p. 252.) Scott, a close friend of MacDonald, had been declared a heretic for preaching at Campbell’s church. (*GMAW*, pp. 192–93.)

⁶⁰¹ *Letters of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen*, ed. by William Hanna (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1878), p. 523; see also James C. Goodloe IV, ‘John McLeod Campbell: The Extent and Nature of the Atonement’, (1997) <www.foundationrt.org/writings/> [accessed 14 Apr 2011].

⁶⁰² *Scottish Theology*, pp. 262–63.

It was this question that motivated MacDonald's quest for his 'true father' (the plot of many of his novels)—what was God *really* like? The problem was that this 'strictly not fully *Christian* doctrine of God' implied a schizophrenic Miltonian deity who was one minute 'just' and the next minute 'merciful':

He thundereth these words into their eares.
 You guilty souls where are you? Have you thus
 Transgrest? See now how you are like to us!
 . . . Thus spake God's Justice; then his Mercy brake
 A deeper silence and him thus bespake.
 Where art thou Adam?
 Is that Face of thine
 Muffled in Clouds that was so like to mine?
 Where art thou? lost! O sad!

As William Poole remarks: 'Thus the thin end of the wedge of dualism is inserted into the Godhead.'⁶⁰³

MacDonald objects strongly to this division. Following Erskine, who had written, 'In God mercy and justice are one and the same thing',⁶⁰⁴ MacDonald states:

There is *no* opposition, *no* strife whatever, between mercy and justice. Those who say justice means the punishing of sin, and mercy the not punishing of sin, and attribute both to God, would make a schism in the very idea of God.

[...]

In God shall we imagine a distinction of office and character [magistrate and father]? God is one; and the depth of foolishness is reached by that theology which talks of God as if he held different offices, and differed in each. It sets a contradiction in the very nature of God himself.⁶⁰⁵

In this sermon, 'Justice', MacDonald declares that the doctrine of substitutionary atonement is 'an evil thing, to be cast out of intellect and heart'; Christ's passion was not a 'satisfaction' of God's justice, a sacrifice of appeasement.⁶⁰⁶ Erskine had already stated unequivocally: 'I am aware that the doctrine of expiation through the vicarious death of Christ is sacred and

⁶⁰³ *Milton and the Idea of the Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 110.

⁶⁰⁴ From Erskine's 'Spiritual Order' in *Scottish Theology*, p. 268.

⁶⁰⁵ *US3*, pp. 114–15.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 133–34.

precious to the hearts of many, nevertheless I am compelled to regard it as a human invention opposed to the character of God.’⁶⁰⁷ MacDonald, in less measured tones, declares:

From such and their false teaching I would gladly help to deliver the true-hearted. Let the dead bury their dead, but I would do what I may to keep them from burying the living.⁶⁰⁸

Christ deals with the power, not the penalty, of sin; sin was the cause of the abuse of Christ, not a requirement for satisfaction by the Father of lights. Rejecting the caricature of Christ submitting to the wrathful blows of the Father on behalf of the elect, he writes: ‘I declare my utter and absolute repudiation of the idea in any form whatever’, concluding: ‘The whole device is a piece of spiritual charlatanry—fit only for a fraudulent jail-delivery.’⁶⁰⁹

The polemic continues in the sermon ‘Righteousness’ denouncing the ‘rubbish heap of legal fiction called vicarious sacrifice, or its shadow called imputed righteousness’,⁶¹⁰ describing it as ‘this most contemptible of false doctrines’, ‘falsehood’, ‘a mean, nauseous invention, false and productive of falsehood’, ‘an embodiment of untruth’. ‘It is the meagre misshapen offspring of the legalism of a poverty-stricken mechanical *fancy*, unlighted by a gleam of divine *imagination*.’⁶¹¹ He repeats: ‘only the child with the child-heart, so far ahead of and *so different from the wise and prudent*’⁶¹² will see through the deception. The issue is not the tension between divine justice and mercy, but that between divine and human justice.

The refusal to separate God’s justice from God’s mercy underlines the conviction that love and light are divine moral attributes which cannot survive such separation. God the Father cannot co-exist with God the schoolmaster. This does not, however, imply a marginalisation of the gravity of sin or its offense to a holy God. The ‘outer skirts’ of God’s presence will, to the unrepentant, be experienced as wrath, but this is not wrathful retribution; it *is* God’s mercy which even in the judgement of sin loves the sinner and is working for that sinner’s deliverance.

⁶⁰⁷ *Scottish Theology*, p. 272.

⁶⁰⁸ *US3*, p. 136.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 145.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 210–11 (emphasis mine).

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, p. 224 (emphasis mine).

5.3 Cosmology

The cosmos is the sum of God's creative thought. Not only is '[t]he thought of God the truth of everything',⁶¹³ humans specifically are 'but a thought of God'.⁶¹⁴ He does not speculate on its ontic nature, simply that 'matter is the result of mind, spirit, thought. The relation between them is [...] simply too close, too near for us to understand.'⁶¹⁵ Rather, he focuses on perception, distinguishing between the 'philosopher [...] who lives in the thought of things, [and] the Christian [...] who lives in the things themselves'⁶¹⁶—those who merely observe and those who engage. Although one would imagine a philosopher being in his element in an idealist universe, the distinction concerns failing to discern the true, divine meaning behind natural phenomena. We 'circle' God at an 'epistemic distance' where human moral choice is genuine.⁶¹⁷

To explore these issues, we consider the short story *The Broken Swords* (1864). The plot concerns a fatherless and sensitive young man who, on receiving an army commission, is sent to war. On showing signs of mental breakdown prior to a military assault, he has his sword broken over his head and is dismissed in disgrace from the army. Subsequently his regiment is destroyed by a land mine. Returning to England, mortified by his failure, the *Bildungsroman* tracks his journey through the margins of society as he tries to avoid recognition and find absolution. After casual and industrial labour (in between which nature works her healing) he reenlists with the army, dying a hero's death.

It is an *exitus-reditus* parable: like the 'prodigal son', human existence involves being sent from the father's presence into a distant soul-forming world where destiny hinges on the decision to return. Equating this to the metanarrative of the Bible, he proposes:

Every tragedy of higher order, constructed in Christian times, will correspond to the grand drama of the Bible; wherein the first act opens with a brilliant sunset vision of Paradise, in which childish sense and need are served with all the profusion of the indulgent nurse. But the glory fades off into grey and black, and night settles down upon the heart which, *rightly discontent with the childish, and not having yet learned the childlike* [emphasis mine], seeks knowledge and manhood as a

⁶¹³ Ibid., p. 105.

⁶¹⁴ Page 71.

⁶¹⁵ *The Miracles of Our Lord*, p. 76. (Ilia Delio argues that from the perspective of quantum phenomena, matter and mind are inseparable; see *Making All Things New* (New York: Orbis, 2015), pp. 55–70.)

⁶¹⁶ *What's Mine's Mine*, III, p. 95.

⁶¹⁷ Discussed further below, see note 659.

thing denied by the Maker, and yet to be gained by the creature; so sets forth alone to climb the heavens, and instead of climbing, falls into the abyss. Then follows the long dismal night of feverish efforts and delirious visions, or, it may be, helpless despair; till at length a deeper stratum of the soul is heaved to the surface; and amid the first dawn of morning, the youth says within him, “I have sinned against my *Maker*— I will arise and go to my *Father* [emphasis in original].”⁶¹⁸

This succinct summary of MacDonald’s soul-making theology (also a précis of this story) equates prelapsarian innocence with childishness and human destiny with childlikeness, sin being a misguided self-centred quest for ‘manhood’. This present reality is the pigsty of the prodigal; childlikeness may be achieved by the decisive act of returning from the wasteland to the father.

The story opens with two sorrowing sisters sitting with their newly-uniformed brother the night before his departure from ‘paradise’. The light of the moon pales the red army coat: ‘In her thoughtful light the whole group seemed more like a meeting in the land of shadows, than a parting in the substantial earth.’ The implication is that the earth is insubstantial, prompting a Kantian question:

But which should be called the land of realities?—the region where appearance, and space, and time drive between, and stop the flowing currents of the soul’s speech? or that region where heart meets heart, and appearance has become the slave to utterance, and space and time are forgotten?⁶¹⁹

The implication is the latter, but the negative view of materiality here is revealing, a jaundiced view at odds with what Gabelman claims is MacDonald’s ‘wholly orthodox’ view of the cosmos and celebration of materiality.⁶²⁰ Here, space-time is an obstacle impeding the ‘flowing currents of the soul’s speech’; it is divisive, preventing ‘heart from meeting heart’.

Perhaps the key is found in Jacob Boehme, a mystic who influenced MacDonald directly, and possibly indirectly through F. D. Maurice,⁶²¹ especially in his proposal that God’s presence is experienced as both light and dark fire. Boehme’s use of Renaissance alchemical terms and

⁶¹⁸ *The Portent and Other Stories*, p. 214. Greville MacDonald personally reprinted this volume in 1924 indicating that in his view it was significant.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁶²⁰ Gabelman, D., *George MacDonald*, p. 164.

⁶²¹ Maurice called him a ‘generative thinker’ according to the sleeve notes of *The Signature of All Things* (Cambridge: J. Clarke, 1969).

creative metaphor to discuss what amounts to transcendental philosophy is, more often than not, baffling, nevertheless a picture emerges of quotidian reality as the fall-out (that is, in some sense the contaminated matter) from a primeval divinely-inspired explosion, now orbiting a divine ‘sun’. Matter emerges out of ‘nothing’.⁶²² ‘for the forms of nature are awakened [by an ‘ethereal blaze’ analogous to a lightning-strike], and are as a turning wheel, and so they carry their spirit the wind’.⁶²³ For Boehme, also, God is ‘fire’ at the centre of this ‘turning wheel’:

the Father’s fiery property makes itself in the divine essence of the eternal love in a mercury of joyfulness; for the Father’s property is the fire-source [...].⁶²⁴

Both writers equate God’s ‘fiery property’ with ‘the eternal love’, and emphasise that ‘outward nature’—since God is the hypostasis, the *ground*, of all being—glows with God’s fire:

for God is a spirit, and as subtle as a thought or will, and nature is his corporeal essence, understand the eternal nature; and the outward nature of this visible comprehensible (footnote, ‘palpable’) world is a manifestation or external birth of the inward spirit and essence of evil and good, that is, a representation, resemblance, and typical similitude of the dark fire and light world.⁶²⁵

Without claiming any nuanced understanding of Boehme’s impenetrable philosophy, two things are evident: first, that the ‘sun-God’ of love is central to created reality; second, that in ‘outward nature’ (the cosmos), God is manifest as a ‘light world’ which coexists with ‘dark fire’, which in some sense is ‘the essence of evil and good’. Created being is therefore a place where all is not light, where shadows fall, and where ‘dark fire’ burns. It is an ambiguous ontological model (‘the essence of evil and good’) complexified by MacDonald proposing a dualist *perceptive* model. In other words, what one sees—whether good or evil—depends not only on the ‘object’ in view, but the nature of perception—particularly its *moral* nature: if one looks with the eyes of a child—or if one is transparent, like Diamond—the dark fire does not burn.

Robert Paslick, who notes resonances between Boehme and Zen Buddhism, observes that both hold that ‘after the Fall [...] the material world is still a mirror of the paradise of the divine

⁶²² ‘Nothing’, for Boehme, is the unformed raw material that God then shapes to form ‘creation’—Milton’s ‘chaos’.

⁶²³ *Signature*, 2. 40.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.* 7. 27.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.* 3. 4.

nature',⁶²⁶ revealing two important shared principles. The first concerns the sacrality of creation. It is the visible aspect of the interpenetration of two universes that coexist and intertwine: from a Buddhist perspective, 'there is no complete separation of worlds, as if nature were all darkness and paradise were some transcendent', leading Paslick to an image that MacDonald uses in the novel *Lilith*: 'The tree outside my window in my so-called real world is also the tree standing in paradise.'⁶²⁷ In *Lilith*, Mr Vane ('Mr Self-Centred') is taken outside of his normal self-focused reality into a parallel universe. Being disorientated and disturbed, not least because his guide also appears as both raven and man, the latter consoles him with the words:

'Perhaps it may comfort you,' said the raven, 'to be told that you have not yet left your house, neither has your house left you. At the same time it cannot contain you, or you inhabit it!'⁶²⁸

We explore this narrative in detail later, but the point here is that the 'house' of personal consciousness is situated within a larger reality. He is, the raven tells him, 'in the region of the seven dimensions', and pointing out a tree in the surrounding pine forest, remarks: 'That tree stands on the hearth of your kitchen, and grows nearly straight up its chimney.'⁶²⁹

This emphasis on the role, and limitations, of perception leads to a second principle: that the problem (sin, conceived as self-centredness) and the solution (becoming God-centred) to the human condition are found in human consciousness. This is not to say the latter is located in individual human consciousness, simply that becoming a child ('salvation') is appropriated subjectively as a conscious moral choice.⁶³⁰ Evil equates to selfish moral choice. For such choice to be genuine, true vision is needed: the self-centred, such as Vane, must learn to see properly in order to make wise choices. Nature is radiant with God's light, but human consciousness may, in rebellion, be drawn towards the 'dark fire', unaware that this is also an aspect of God—the hell of God's burning outer garments. However, those with a true childlike heart will be able to experience the light of God *and* the purging dark fire of God in the here and now without being burned.

⁶²⁶ 'From Nothingness to Nothingness: The Nature and Destiny of the Self in Boehme and Nishitani', *Eastern Buddhist*, 30 (1997), 13–31 (p. 22).

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

⁶²⁸ *Lilith* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1896), p. 25.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., pp. 25–26.

⁶³⁰ This claim is discussed further below, page 144.

Paslick notes, negatively, that in Keiji Nishitani's understanding of Zen Buddhism, 'the more fully self-reflective the subjectivity of the self becomes, the more it becomes aware of the presence of nihility at the ground of its existence', leading to despair,⁶³¹ or, in Bonhoeffer's language in *Act and Being*, the sinful 'narcissism of the human will' leads to an awareness that 'I myself am Adam',⁶³² a self-awareness akin to Charley Osbourne's conclusion, '*I am a devil*'.⁶³³ In contrast, positively, Nishitani finds peace and identity in the 'paradoxical realm of [...] serious play where nonaction is genuine action and where nonthinking is genuine thinking'. It is the place of surrender, echoing Christ's words, 'he who loses his life for My sake will find it'.⁶³⁴ True self-identity is only found in a conscious, unselfish turning towards the Other, which Bonhoeffer suggests is '[n]ot a self-losing to oneself, but a self-finding in Christ';⁶³⁵ true peace, the region where conscience is redundant,⁶³⁶ is only to be found in the willing embrace of God's purgatorial fire—the return to the 'primal Sun of life'.⁶³⁷

MacDonald's positive view of materiality is, then, ambiguous. Ontological ambiguity (that the cosmos is 'the essence of evil and good') and perceptive duality (that there are child-like and unchildlike ways of seeing) lead to a very ambivalent view of the perceived world. However satisfying the above model may be, it is clear that it falls into the category of an abductive hypothesis: it may be a good 'fit' and account for subjective experience, but clearly there are thorny issues, the most intractable being the perennial problem of locating the source of evil in the divine nature. MacDonald's answer to this appears to be, after Boehme, to posit that much of what we call evil is not really evil but erroneous perception of God's dark fire.

In MacDonald's universe, there is no destructive evil that is contrary to God's will, no event that does not (eventually) mediate God's presence, nothing that does not short-circuit the inevitable decision to return to the father. Evil is solely down to human moral failure, and right relationship with the world is reduced to a moral choice: to be a 'philosopher' or a 'Chris-

⁶³¹ 'From Nothingness to Nothingness', p. 24.

⁶³² *Act and Being* (London: Collins, 1962), pp. 162, 165.

⁶³³ *Cumbermede*, p. 330.

⁶³⁴ Matt. 10:39. A repeating refrain: Matt. 16:25; Mk. 8:35; Lk. 9:24, 17:33; Jn 12:25.

⁶³⁵ *Act and Being*, p. 179.

⁶³⁶ Bonhoeffer quotes Luther: 'Whoever lacks conscience is Christ or the spirit of evil (from *Theologia Deutsch*, *ibid.*, p. 177), characterising being 'in Christ' as the perfect gaze towards Christ, the opposite of narcissism.

⁶³⁷ Note 274.

tion',⁶³⁸ a rebellious or a submissive child. To choose the latter is to begin the return journey to the place where 'heart meets heart', but—in the light of the above comments—involves turning away from the 'pigsty', or at minimum, turning a blind eye to aspects of reality as if it was unholy rather than numinous. MacDonald, in other words, ignores evil rather than accounting for it.

The Broken Swords makes it clear that honourable death is preferable to dishonourable life. On his return to England, 'the youth' (who is never named and appears to represent 'everyman') travels northwards. Sleeping rough, nature works her office, 'For the face of nature is the face of God, and must bear expressions that can influence, though unconsciously to them, the most ignorant and hopeless of His children.'⁶³⁹ In contrast, the negative aspects of 'reality' are marginalised.

Unusually for a MacDonald story, the protagonist finds work in a cotton mill. Despite 'windows so coated by dust that they looked like frosted glass; showing, as it passed through the air to fall on the dirty floor, how the breath of life was thick with dust of iron and wood, and films of cotton',⁶⁴⁰ one does not feel the grinding degradation of slave labour, and despite the plague being in the city, one does not sense danger. There is much sentimentality, and, just as unreal children seem impervious to evil in other narratives, so factories lack toxicity, neither are children's arms torn off by machines. Instead, the emphasis is on the factory being devoid of "divine air" and the open heavens, whose sunlight only reached him in an afternoon, as he stood at his loom'.⁶⁴¹ The factory, as a human construct, blocks divine light: evil is privation rather than depravation. The implication is that factories—and, in this narrative, war—represent human rebellion, but that God uses both to save his child from eternal death, earthly death being virtually inconsequential.

In this narrative, the 'deep infinite skies' of God's immutable presence 'contain' quotidian reality:

⁶³⁸ Page 131.

⁶³⁹ *The Portent and Other Stories*, p. 218.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*

For above every cloud, above every storm, rise up, calm, clear, divine, the deep infinite skies; they embrace the tempest even as the sunshine; by their permission it exists within their boundless peace: therefore it cannot hurt, and must pass away, while there they stand as ever, domed up eternally, lasting, strong, and pure.⁶⁴²

On this view, ‘the deep infinite skies’ give permission for both good and evil to co-exist within ‘their boundless peace’. That evil ‘cannot hurt, and must pass away’ reflects MacDonald’s pastoral focus on believers who will benefit from eschatological resolution, but also implies that evil, ultimately, like death, is of no consequence.

However one views reality (we should perhaps heed his advice that it is ‘too near for us to understand’), of most concern to MacDonald is the function of human will: the environment in which humans are placed with its light and dark fire demands that a choice be made, but whatever the choice, humans remain the progeny of the Father.⁶⁴³

With a better understanding of MacDonald’s view of reality, we now turn to its human occupants.

5.4 Anthropology

5.4 (a) The human creature

MacDonald’s cosmology leads to an anthropology more concerned with morality than mechanics, one that prioritises original blessing (the *imago Dei*) over original sin (topics covered more fully below). For example, he finds meaning in Wordsworth’s proposition that humans come into the world ‘trailing clouds of glory’, and that the *exitus-reditus* trajectory (paradise–vale of soul-making–heaven) is recapitulated in the life of each individual. As Christ, the perfect child, was continually aware of his divine pre-natal existence (a questionable thesis),⁶⁴⁴ all humans are aware of their divine origin. After quoting with approbation Wordsworth’s *Intimations of Immortality* and Henry Vaughan’s reminiscences of ‘those early dayes, when I | Shin’d in my angel-infancy!’, he writes:

⁶⁴² Ibid., p. 220; cf. Shelley’s *Adonais*: ‘Life, like a dome of many coloured glass, | Stains the white radiance of eternity’, discussed by MacDonald in *Orts* (p. 6).

⁶⁴³ *US2*, pp. 115–37.

⁶⁴⁴ See, for example, ‘The Consciousness of Christ Concerning Himself and His Mission’, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1985_coscienza-gesu_en.html.

Whoever has thus gazed on flower or cloud; whoever can recall poorest memory of the trail of glory that hung about his childhood, must have some faint idea how his father's house and the things in it always looked, and must still look to the Lord. With him there is no fading into the light of common day.⁶⁴⁵

Likewise, he is open to the 'mechanics' of evolution, but only inasmuch as this can be co-opted to serve his core thesis that God's sole aim is to create children:

For this vision of truth God has been working for ages of ages. For this simple condition, this apex of life, upon which a man wonders like a child that he cannot make other men see as he sees, the whole labour of God's science, history, poetry—from the time when the earth gathered itself into a lonely drop of fire from the red rim of the driving sun-wheel to the time when Alexander John Scott worshipped him from its face—was evolving truth upon truth in lovely vision, in torturing law, never lying, never repenting; and for this will the patience of God labour while there is yet a human soul whose eyes have not been opened, whose child-heart has not yet been born in him.⁶⁴⁶

The view of 'science' is secondary, therefore, to the imaginative discernment of meaning. That this evolutionary vision contradicts the idea that the child has some kind of pre-natal heavenly existence is immaterial: rather, he is replacing negative views of childhood with positive ones. Simian savagery and original sin are replaced by evolutionary truth ('evolving truth upon truth in lovely vision') and the *imago Dei*. Whatever the 'mechanics', the goal of God's creation is that 'child hearts' might be brought to birth.

MacDonald's idealism leads to a focus on the mind, notably the roles of imagination and will. Regarding the former, this is simply a world where logic alone will not suffice:

We are here in a region far above that commonly claimed for science, open only to the heart of the child and the childlike man and woman [...]. For things as they are, not as science deals with them, are the revelation of God to his children.⁶⁴⁷

Whatever the nuances of MacDonald's ontology, practically speaking 'nature' mediates God. It offers 'Posterns [...] to the supernal; [...] | Loopholes to the Infinite'.⁶⁴⁸ Nature's true meaning is transcendent and must be perceived imaginatively:

⁶⁴⁵ *HG*, pp. 54–55.

⁶⁴⁶ *US1*, p. 29.

⁶⁴⁷ *US3*, p. 62.

⁶⁴⁸ 'My Room', *The Poetical Works of George MacDonald*, 2 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1893), II, p. 18.

The truth *of a thing*, then, is the blossom of it, the thing it is made for, the topmost stone set on with rejoicing; truth in a man's imagination is the power to recognize this truth of a thing; and wherever, in anything that God has made, in the glory of it, be it sky or flower or human face, we see the glory of God, there a true imagination is beholding a truth of God.⁶⁴⁹

We find corresponding ideas in Boehme. The secrets of the universe are only open to the imaginative child. In his terminology, God will only give the pearl of the philosopher's stone to a true magus—one who will 'walk in the person of Christ [...] that he may have magical sight'.⁶⁵⁰ God does not give wisdom to the unchildlike (he who is 'not in this birth of restoration, and walks not himself in the way wherein Christ walked upon the earth'), but—with echoes of Wisdom playing at God's side during the creative act⁶⁵¹—gives it to his children: 'for the pearl of which I write is paradisaical, which God does not cast before swine, but gives it to his children for their play and delight'.⁶⁵²

Both writers emphasise that the imaginative child is loved by, not alienated from, God, but there remains a moral imperative to choose wisely. Human will is the prime faculty used to obtain 'salvation', the choice not only to turn to God for forgiveness, but to live obediently. 'Man's first business is,' MacDonald writes, "'What does God want me to do?" not "What will God do if I do so and so?"'⁶⁵³

God's will is perceived imaginatively through the abductive drawing of the Spirit towards Godself from beyond the horizons of consciousness. The response must be obedience:

I can find no words strong enough to serve for the weight of this necessity—this obedience. It is the one terrible heresy of the church, that it has always been presenting something else than obedience as faith in Christ.⁶⁵⁴

Obedience, furthermore, is not simply a temporal demand: since mutual submission is intrinsic to the Father–Son 'idea of the universe' it is the eternal orientation of the child of God. 'Obedience is the grandest thing in the world to begin with. Yes, and we shall end with it too.'⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁴⁹ *US3*, p. 69.

⁶⁵⁰ *Signature*, 7. 73.

⁶⁵¹ Proverbs 8.22–31.

⁶⁵² *Signature*, 7. 74.

⁶⁵³ *US1*, p. 148.

⁶⁵⁴ *US2*, p. 243.

5.4 (b) Selfhood and identity

If a true child is one that, having imaginatively discerned, chooses wisely, an evil child is unimaginative (or wilful) and chooses unwisely. This essential dichotomy drives MacDonald's doctrine of evil: the choice concerns whether to accept or reject one's God-given, and therefore only true, identity. The *cor curvum in se* leads to false identity, is the essence of sin, and—if we are to believe 'The Lost Soul'—results in destruction.⁶⁵⁶ In contrast, 'The man who does not house self, has room to be his real self—God's eternal idea of him.'⁶⁵⁷

Three implications are apparent. First, that 'self' and 'identity' primarily have meaning with reference to the divine 'other' who not only gives life but as Father remains intrinsically connected to, invested in, and sustaining of, that life which shares the divine nature. Second, that each person is *uniquely* made in the image of God; that is, each person is, to use David Kelsey's terminology, an 'unsubstitutable' self whose true identity is a very specific 'eternal idea'. Third, since true selfhood is the opposite of destructive self-reflexivity, there is an implicit social dimension. A man's 'consciousness of himself', he writes, 'is the reflex from those about him, not the result of his own turning in of his regard upon himself'.⁶⁵⁸ At first sight, this appears a recognition that selfhood is not monadic but socially forged, however this is not the case: a person's correct *evaluation* of their consciousness or identity is found through interaction with others, not that it is so forged. True identity, he insists, inheres in 'God's eternal idea'.

The human self is gifted with *will* and *imagination*. MacDonald considers the former to be free: that human beings are orbiting the divine sun at an 'epistemic distance',⁶⁵⁹ that is, the place where human choice is genuine and determines trajectory—towards or away from God. While acknowledging God's sovereignty, MacDonald stresses that the gift of human free will

⁶⁵⁵ *Orts*, p. 307.

⁶⁵⁶ A poem implying annihilation (page 156).

⁶⁵⁷ *HG*, p. 87.

⁶⁵⁸ *US3*, p. 224.

⁶⁵⁹ 'A term used by John Hick [1922–2012] implying that humans are generally unaware of God's presence in the world. Hick locates the origin of evil in his notion of epistemic distance [...] that an individual's cognitive distance from God will entail a self-centredness [...]. This stance gives rise to moral evil' (Michael Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 70–72). Hick, like MacDonald, argues that in the end there will be 'no personal life that is unperfected and no suffering that has not eventually become a phase in the fulfilment of God's good purpose' (*ibid.*, p. 376).

would not be free if it could be somehow overridden: ‘That,’ he argues, ‘would be to make a will in order that it might be no will’:

The whole labour of God is that the will of man should be free as his will is free—in the same way that his will is free—by the perfect love of the man for that which is true, harmonious, lawful, creative. If a man say, “But might not the will of God make my will with the intent of over-riding and enslaving it?” I answer, such a Will could not create, could not be God, for it involves the false and contrarious.⁶⁶⁰

So human choice is genuine (although I will challenge this conclusion). God is, nevertheless, sovereign: God is still God despite those in God’s image being described as ‘little Gods’, a phrase underlining the dangerous human potential to become self-centred. Without this being a real danger, the notion of sacrifice—offering one’s ‘self’ back to God in worship⁶⁶¹—would have no meaning. ‘God gives his children *selves*, with wishes and choices, that they might have the true offering to lay upon the altar; for on that altar nothing will burn but *selves*.’⁶⁶² If such offering is not made voluntarily, self is, paradoxically, self-destructive: it is ‘the one all-potent annihilator of individuality’.⁶⁶³ Reflecting on Jesus’s discourse about denying self,⁶⁶⁴ he emphasises that the child must choose the path of obedience, of total submission:

We must become as little children, and Christ must be born in us; we must learn of him, and the one lesson he has to give is himself: he does first all he wants us to do; he is first all he wants us to be. [...] *we must take the will of God as the very life of our being*.⁶⁶⁵

All persons are made in God’s image in a general sense; all are, and never cease to be, children of their divine Father. Original sin is not the issue—he seems to concur with Novalis that this is an ‘ancient, heavy guilt-*illusion*’ that breeds ‘death and misery’:⁶⁶⁶ the issue, rather, is *present* sin. The *reditus* leg of the journey often begins with a person’s awareness of ‘what in himself is despicable, disappointing, unworthy [...] what sometimes he calls *the old Adam*, sometimes *the flesh*, sometimes *his lower nature*, sometimes *his evil self*’, defined in the nega-

⁶⁶⁰ *The Miracles of Our Lord*, pp. 55–56.

⁶⁶¹ Rom. 12.1.

⁶⁶² *Castle Warlock*, p. 234.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

⁶⁶⁴ Lk. 9.23–24.

⁶⁶⁵ *US2*, p. 210 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁶⁶ *Rampolli*, ‘Song I’, p. 18 (translation MacDonald’s, emphasis mine).

tive as ‘that part of his being where God is not’.⁶⁶⁷ Recognition of this, and then setting one’s will to being reunited with God, is the beginning of sharing the divine nature:

When a man wills that his being be conformed to the being of his origin, [...] *thus receiving God, he becomes, in the act, a partaker of the divine nature*, a true son of the living God, and an heir of all he possesses: by the obedience of a son, he receives into himself the very life of the Father.⁶⁶⁸

This seems to reflect the early Church Fathers’ distinction between ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in Genesis 1:26. The latter equates to being a ‘true (obedient) son’; the former—since the person is aware of the need to be conformed—equates to an ‘untrue’ (disobedient) child. Being made in God’s image, therefore, has to do with potentiality rather than status, a potential realisable through Christ’s death: not that Christ made humans acceptable in God’s sight, but that Christ defeated the forces of evil preventing a response. Christ dealt with the power, not the penalty, of sin, re-gifting humans with free will such that the choice to return to the Father is genuine.

In MacDonald’s soteriology, however, that power is not—as Wilson laments—mere human effort aided by a vague all-pervading natural force:⁶⁶⁹ it is the presence of Christ in his child. Although MacDonald seems allergic to the term ‘grace’ because of its ‘atonement’ overtones,⁶⁷⁰ essentially he describes grace working in individuals to draw them towards childhood. In fact, ‘grace and truth [are,] in a word, childlikeness’.⁶⁷¹ There must be divine–human co-operation, however: ‘He has made us, but we have to be.’ Discussing John’s account of Christ’s role in creation, he distinguishes between things that were made *through* Christ, and those made *in* Christ; only the latter, he argues—when it comes to human beings—are, through obedience, children of the Father of lights:

He has made us, but we have to be. All things were made *through* the Word, but that which was made *in* the Word was life, and that life is the light of men: they who live by this light, that is, live as Jesus lived—by obedience, namely, to the Father, have a share in their own making; the light becomes life in them; they are, in their lower way, alive with the life that was first born in Jesus,

⁶⁶⁷ *US3*, p. 77.

⁶⁶⁸ *US2*, pp. 153–54 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁶⁹ Note 19.

⁶⁷⁰ The word ‘grace’ is used only twenty times in the three volumes of *Unspoken Sermons*.

⁶⁷¹ *US1*, p. 13.

and through him has been born in them—by obedience they become one with the godhead: ‘As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.’ He does not *make* them the sons of God, but he gives them power to become the sons of God: in choosing and obeying the truth, man becomes the true son of the Father of lights.⁶⁷²

This soteriology reflects the Protestant emphasis on the need for a personal response to God’s grace, but is based on the premise that the individual must avail itself of Christ’s universal provision rather than salvation inhering in the sovereign God’s ‘election’ to save by the imputation of righteousness to an otherwise guilty soul.

The proposal, therefore, that the problem and the solution to the human condition is located in human consciousness⁶⁷³ is not to challenge the objectiveness of the Christ event, but to take account of the fact that becoming a child involves subjective human processes. Put differently: if the *imago Dei* primarily reflects *will* and *imagination*, ‘salvation’ is primarily mental. The words of Keiji Nishitani are perhaps helpful here, for from a Zen Buddhist perspective, any vision of resolution to the human condition remains merely theoretical unless it is subjectively appropriated by an ‘obedient’ individual. Logical assent is not enough: the Word *must* become flesh, truth must become ‘embodied’ in the person. Writing concerning the appropriation of ‘philosophical and religious truths at a higher level’, Nishitani explains:

This means that we have come to know them by means of our body instead of our head—that is, by becoming a human being as a whole. It is not until we acquire knowledge in this way that we come to appropriate it truly, that is, to embody it in our body—or rather, I should say, if the term “body” leads to some misunderstanding, in the whole of us, including body and mind. The phrase “to embody something in one’s body” means that it is first of all given life in such a manner that it comes to be realized in one’s way of living. When we gain knowledge in this way, something makes its appearance in one way or another in our everyday life.⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷² *US2*, pp. 126–27 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁷³ Page 136.

⁶⁷⁴ *On Buddhism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 57.

This is a restatement of MacDonald's distinction between observed 'scientific' fact and subjectively appropriated imaginative truth.⁶⁷⁵ The latter, inasmuch as it is a genuine encounter with Christ, the truth, must be acted upon and become an 'indwelling presence and power':

Our Lord had no design of constructing a system of truth in intellectual forms. The truth of the moment in its relation to him, The Truth, was what he spoke. He spoke out of a region of realities which he knew could only be suggested—not represented—in the forms of intellect and speech. With vivid flashes of life and truth his words invade our darkness, rousing us with sharp stings of light to will our awaking, to arise from the dead and cry for the light which he can give, not in the lightning of words only, but in indwelling presence and power.⁶⁷⁶

It is a theology which stresses the incarnational nature of truth: 'The Truth' must 'invade our darkness', 'the Word must become flesh' in the life of an individual.

5.5 The problem of evil

5.5 (a) The nature of evil

As noted, MacDonald focuses, first, on sin (human selfishness) rather than evil—on the negative effects of individual wilfulness at the expense of a wider perspective. Second, he considers evil to be privation rather than depravation. In this idealist universe, evil exists where God is prevented from 'shining' by wills that oppose God's. Although both human and 'demonic' (as we will explore in our reading of *Lilith*), the barrier of human will is the focus: sin lives in 'that part of [a person's] being where God is not'.⁶⁷⁷

Sin as 'culpable privation' (as self-caused) is articulated in the novel *Castle Warlock*. Cosmo, an archetypal child, the devoted son of the waning laird, is on the roof of a coach, 'his heart swelling at the thought of being so soon in his father's arms', when he observes shadows cast by the sun and becomes philosophical:

How dark were the shadows the sun was casting!
Absurd! the sun casts no shadows—only light.
How so? Were the sun not shining, would there be one single shadow?
Yes; there would be just one single shadow; all would be shadow.

⁶⁷⁵ Nishitani concurs: 'It seems to me that something is involved in faith that is ordinarily out of reach of scientific investigation, but we are convinced of its truth from a more basic and comprehensive standpoint beyond all the realms of science' (ibid., p. 58).

⁶⁷⁶ *USI*, pp. 66–67.

⁶⁷⁷ Note 668.

There would be none of those things we call shadows.
True; all would be shade; there would be no shadows.

Evil would not be visible if God didn't 'shine'. Cosmo then understands why—

the Jews came to assign evil to the hand of God as well as good, and what St. Paul meant when he said that the law gave life to sin; for by the sun is the shadow; where no light is, there is no darkness, where no life, no death.

He concludes that if God were to shine unimpeded, no 'object' (will) would be able to prevent God's shining; all would be transparent. In which case, he wonders, 'where there is no longer anything covered or hid, shall sin be able to live?'⁶⁷⁸ The image implies that God temporally (that is, in this present life) allows sin to exist, but will shine fully, and 'destructively', in the eschaton—that is, God's light will destroy the shadows in individuals (not the individuals themselves), and renew creation. As Novalis had put it:

The external world is a world of shadows, which casts its shadows onto the realm of light. At present, it is true, that the inner world seems to us so dark, lonely and without form, but how different will it appear when this darkness has gone, and those shadowy forms have been removed. We will be able to enjoy the world more than ever, for our spirit has become ethereal.⁶⁷⁹

This highlights a central theological question that preoccupied MacDonald: that of the relationship between the 'realm of light' and the 'external world of shadows'. Is God responsible for the shadows? Here, MacDonald suggests that the Jews *assigned* evil to the hand of God, in other words, that God was apparently the source of evil, but that the appearance was deceptive. God allowing Godself to be thus implicated is instead evidence of divine forbearance regarding temporal rebellion (sin), but also hints at MacDonald's more radical view that all evil not only works for good, but *is* a good.⁶⁸⁰ The world is a 'vale of probation' (Novalis),⁶⁸¹ or, as John Keats put it, a 'system of Soul-making', a 'School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read', an unpleasant but necessary experience:

⁶⁷⁸ *Castle Warlock*, p. 241.

⁶⁷⁹ *Fragments* (1798), 'Pollen No. 16', in *European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism: A Reader in Aesthetic Practice*, ed. by Martin P. A. Travers (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 28.

⁶⁸⁰ By no means a new idea. Leibniz, in 1710, had also argued that evil was a catalyst for good. (*Theodicy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952) p. 130, §13.)

⁶⁸¹ *Henry of Ofterdingen*, p. 118.

Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways?⁶⁸²

Or as MacDonald put it:

What is the whole system of things for, but our education? Does God care for suns and planets and satellites, for divine mathematics and ordered harmonies, more than for his children?⁶⁸³

This 'World of Pains' always brings positive results, and is controlled by God. Those passages that do speak of widespread, apparently meaningless, suffering, such as animals 'evermore issuing from the fountain of life, daily born into evil things', inevitably focus on eschatological resolution; in this case, the view that animals, too, will be resurrected.⁶⁸⁴ Without this perspective, MacDonald is forced to concur with Darwin that God would have to be considered a demon:

To believe that God made many of the lower creatures merely for prey, or to be the slaves of a slave, and writhe under the tyrannies of a cruel master who will not serve his own master; that he created an endless succession of them to reap little or no good of life but its cessation [...] is to believe in a God who, so far as one portion of his creation is concerned, is a demon.⁶⁸⁵

In this life, then, God is ensuring that all things work to the end of creating children. For example, the storm caused by North Wind which sinks a ship is justified on the basis that for every individual on that ship it will work for their good, and secondly, that she is merely obeying the orders of a higher power—a restatement that all 'natural' evil is God's will. The floods in *Alec Forbes* and *Sir Gibbie*, we noted, had a positive, cathartic effect on the unchildlike, as did Truffy's beating at the hands of Malison which disabled him. For Gibbie, who had no need of correction, the flood simply proved his mettle.

⁶⁸² 'XCII, To George and Georgina Keats, April 28, 1819', *Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Sidney Colvin (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891), p. 256.

⁶⁸³ *US2*, p. 77.

⁶⁸⁴ *HG*, p. 210, see also note 1041.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

5.5 (b) Evil sheepdogs and wicked fairies

‘Sorrow herself will reveal one day that she was only the beneficent shadow of Joy’, writes MacDonald, but then ponders: ‘Will Evil ever show herself the beneficent shadow of Good?’⁶⁸⁶

That evil, like Milton’s Satan, is the (albeit unwitting) servant of good is a perennial refrain, expressed thus, for example, in *Little Daylight*: ‘But I never knew of any interference on the part of a wicked fairy that did not turn out a good thing in the end.’⁶⁸⁷ Or, in a letter to the wife of A. J. Scott: ‘But you must not be too much disappointed if he should not get [the job], for you know *nothing can go wrong, or be really a misfortune*.’⁶⁸⁸

Evil, however, is not only the servant of good, but *is* a good, as illustrated by Gibbie’s view that the Good Shepherd has ‘evil sheepdogs’ at his command.⁶⁸⁹ These dogs are not merely ‘around and about’ the shepherd: MacDonald believes these ‘strong, sharp-toothed sheep-dogs’ are specifically there because the great shepherd *sent* them to worry the recalcitrant rebel until s/he repents,⁶⁹⁰ but are these ‘sacred creatures’—‘pain, fear, anxiety, and shame’⁶⁹¹—necessarily evil? All are human *responses* to some external stimulus rather than ‘evil’ in themselves, and are in the same category as doubts, ‘the messengers of the Living One to rouse the honest’.⁶⁹²

That what we name ‘evil’ may not be so is evident. Kelsey, for example, remarks that the food chain is part of God’s creation that was called ‘good’.⁶⁹³ MacDonald, however, needs to go further: since *all* humans are God’s children, whether currently rebellious or submissive, all evil must be God’s tool for reform, ‘For whom the Lord loves He chastens, | And scourges every son whom He receives.’⁶⁹⁴ So the ‘dogs of the great shepherd’ are targeted at unbelievers, the ‘un-childlike soul’ characterised by ‘arrogance and ignorance’ who feels it has ‘rights *against* God’; despite operating in ‘the will of the flesh’, it is still a child—one in whom God’s ‘candle still

⁶⁸⁶ *AF*, II, p. 242.

⁶⁸⁷ *NW*, p. 269.

⁶⁸⁸ *Letters GM*, p. 112 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁸⁹ Page 93.

⁶⁹⁰ *US2*, p. 194.

⁶⁹¹ Note 408.

⁶⁹² Note 241 (cf. Heb. 13.2).

⁶⁹³ *EE*, p. 208.

⁶⁹⁴ Heb. 12.6, Prov. 3.12.

burns', albeit dimly.⁶⁹⁵ The dogs, then, are not evil but 'angels in disguise' sent by the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to search for the lost one.⁶⁹⁶

So what about the wicked fairies? We find more information about them in *Little Day-light*.

Now wicked fairies will not be bound by the laws which the good fairies obey [...]. But it is all of no consequence, for they never succeed [in gaining their ends]; nay, in the end it brings about the very thing they are trying to prevent. So you see [...] wicked fairies are dreadfully stupid, although from the beginning of the world they have really helped instead of thwarted the good fairies, not one of them is a bit wiser for it.⁶⁹⁷

This echoes Milton's view of Satan who is God's unwitting servant:

That with reiterated crimes he might
Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
Evil to others, and enrag'd might see
How all his malice serv'd but to bring forth
Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shewn
On Man by him seduc't⁶⁹⁸

Unlike the angelic dogs, 'wicked fairies', it appears—who have been trying to undermine things 'from the beginning of the world'—*are* morally evil. That moral evil is essentially wilful (is not a 'substance' that can be divorced from will) is admissible; that 'wicked fairies' have always 'really helped [...] the good fairies' is more problematic. It implies that wilful moral evil is part of God's design. Since God cannot be held responsible for moral evil, we must conclude that the 'wicked fairies' do not really have free will (that God is the puppet-master behind the scenes) and this moral evil is really a good. This appears to be the message of the narratives we have explored.

5.5 (c) The ministry of pain

The theme is developed in relation to pain and suffering. In the novel *What's Mine's Mine*, where an honest Scots clan is pitched against a whisky-brewing English interloper, MacDonald

⁶⁹⁵ *US2*, pp. 193–94.

⁶⁹⁶ Matt. 18.12; Lk. 15.4.

⁶⁹⁷ *NW*, p. 287.

⁶⁹⁸ *Paradise Lost*, I, 214–19.

speaks of the ‘ministry of pain’. Alister, the young (honest peasant) laird is ploughing with two bulls in harness. When the animals start an altercation, he ‘took the reigns, and administering a blow each to the animals, made them stand still’.⁶⁹⁹ In the following monologue, aimed at enlightening one of the Englishman’s daughters horrified by the gratuitous violence, he explains:

There are tender-hearted people who virtually object to the whole scheme of creation; they would neither have force used nor pain suffered [...]. Millions of human beings but for suffering would never develop an atom of affection. The man who would spare *due* suffering is not wise. It is folly to conclude a thing ought not to be done because it hurts. There are powers to be born, creations to be perfected, sinners to be redeemed, through the ministry of pain, that could be born, perfected, redeemed, in no other way.⁷⁰⁰

This may be a fictive voice, but MacDonald is clearly exploring the Keatsian view that suffering is a ‘necessary evil’ intrinsic to ‘the whole scheme of creation’ without which ‘millions’ would never be born, perfected, or—significantly—*redeemed*. The phrase ‘*due* pain’ implies ‘you asked for it’: that wilful behaviour has negative consequences. In *Mary Marston*, for example, after the death of their baby, both parents (the father responsible for the death through neglect) become ill. It is the beginning of the father’s reformation:

Whatever the effect of illness may be upon the temper of some, it is most certainly an ally of the conscience. All pains, indeed, and all sorrows, all demons, yea, and all sins themselves, under the suffering care of the highest minister, are but the ministers of truth and righteousness.⁷⁰¹

But are ‘*all demons*’ and ‘*all sins themselves*’—even if under ‘the care of the highest minister’—really ‘ministers of truth and righteousness’? This is a strong claim.⁷⁰² One might justifiably conclude: ‘It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.’⁷⁰³ MacDonald appears unable to accept that undeserved, destructive evil exists. Here, for example, he suggests that such affliction must be caused by ‘exceptional faultiness of character’ rather than that, as Jesus once observed, ‘neither this man nor his parents sinned’,⁷⁰⁴ or, if this is not the case, that it

⁶⁹⁹ *What’s Mine’s Mine*, I, p. 169.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ *Mary Marston* (London: Samson Low, Marston and Company, 1894), p. 232.

⁷⁰² Dramatized in *Castle Warlock*. The laird regards his drunken English guest ‘with something of the pity an angel must feel for the wretch to whom he is set [*sic*] to give his last chance—ere sorer measures be taken in which angels are not the ministers’ (*Castle Warlock*, p. 127).

⁷⁰³ Matt. 9.34, cf. Matt. 12.24, Mk. 3.22, and Lk. 11.15.

⁷⁰⁴ Jn 9.3.

is given ‘for the greatness of good’ it would bring. In short, symptoms such as ‘pain, fear, anxiety, and shame’ are always evidence of sin (or the Good Shepherd’s remedial response to it), ignoring the fact that many sinners live very happy and healthy lives, and many saints are tormented to faithlessness.

The problem is that ‘millions of human beings’⁷⁰⁵ suffer the consequences of evil whose ‘ministry’ results in the exact opposite of ‘developing affection’. MacDonald seems to have backed himself into a corner: his universalism implies that God is morally bound to make ‘all things work together for good’ for *all*.⁷⁰⁶ This contributes to the inadequacy and unbelievability of many of his fictive portrayals, especially of children exposed to evil.

In mitigation, one must note that MacDonald was not writing in a vacuum. Like many Victorians, life was not easy. He was predeceased by five of his eleven children, and throughout his life battled with tuberculosis, often coming near to death and experiencing chronic pain. He expresses a personal view of suffering and the possibility of death in *The Diary of an Old Soul*:

Yestereve, Death came, and knocked at my thin door,
I from the window looked: the thing I saw,
The shape uncouth, I had not seen before.
I was disturbed—with fear, in sooth, not awe;
Whereof ashamed, I instantly did rouse
My will to seek thee—only to fear the more;
Alas! I could not find thee in the house.

I was like Peter when he began to sink.
To thee a new prayer therefore I have got—
That, when death comes in earnest to my door,
Thou wouldst thyself go, when the latch doth clink,
And lead him to my room, up to my cot;
Then hold thy child’s hand, hold and leave him not,
Till Death has done with him for evermore.⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰⁵ Note 700.

⁷⁰⁶ In the discourse about ‘babes’ and the ‘wise and prudent’ (and elsewhere) the implication is that *all* humans are already ‘children’ and that the good father will therefore bring them home. Other passages, however, imply a decision is needed to become a child, and only then does real childhood begin (as briefly discussed on page 143).

⁷⁰⁷ ‘Diary of an Old Soul’, in *Rampolli*, p. 190.

These stanzas are, perhaps, more realistic than much of his fiction: approaching death ‘disturbs’, engenders fear, and then shame about being afraid. However, the reference to the ‘cot’ and the prayer to ‘hold thy child’s hand’ indicate that even at this point of personal doubt he is confident of being a child. But he is writing as a believer: our question here concerns those who are *not* ‘children’. A believer may be able accept MacDonald’s assertion:

It is worth all suffering—yes that suffering that springs from vacancy, abortiveness & futility—to be at length one with God.⁷⁰⁸

However, evidence regarding the impact of evil on unbelievers does not support this claim unless one accepts the tenuous claim that the suffering of those such as the suicide Charley Osbourne, or the sensitive soldier in *The Broken Swords* who dies a futile premature death, is of benefit.

5.6 Soteriology

In the same way that God may be perceived falsely by the unrepentant, MacDonald is suggesting that the experience and perception of ‘evil’ comes down to *how* one sees and experiences, rather than *what* one is seeing and experiencing. We begin, therefore, by considering further how both ‘hell’ and ‘salvation’ are aspects of God’s being.

5.6 (a) Hell and salvation

The abiding post-Reformation question, ‘How do I know I am one of the elect?’, led to the more practical concern, ‘How do I escape from hell?’, a concern also to MacDonald, for despite considering hell as dark fire, the skirt of God’s being, he does not minimise its severity or imply its non-existence. Writing in the preface to a contemporary dramatization, *Letters from Hell*, he warns against assuming that moral objections to caricatures of hell or questions about its eternal duration imply its non-existence:

In these days has arisen another falsehood—less, yet very perilous: thousands of half-thinkers imagine that, since it is declared with such authority that hell is not everlasting, there is then no hell at all.⁷⁰⁹

⁷⁰⁸ *Letters GM*, p. 65.

MacDonald does object, though, to medieval images of the ‘hell of Exhausted Mercy’—‘a hell the smoke of whose torments would arise and choke the elect themselves about the throne of God’⁷¹⁰ (he suggests that Dante’s mind was ‘lowered’ by his narrative)⁷¹¹—which imply that God’s creative power must sustain life in a state of eternal destruction such that ‘the breath still breathed into the soul of man by his Maker is no longer the breath of life, but the breath of infinite death’.⁷¹²

We need to be clear here about MacDonald’s cosmology. At the centre of his universe is the ‘burning’ love of God, at the other extreme is ‘outer darkness’. This is the realm of ‘The Lost Soul’ (see below) where, as it asymptotically approaches nihilism (MacDonald seems to imply that sentience is never quite extinguished) God’s presence nevertheless sustains life. This place of outer darkness is MacDonald’s hell. It is *not* the place where the fire of God as a purgatorial force is felt most keenly (which he often refers to as ‘hell’);⁷¹³ that moment of purgatorial mercy has already been rejected. It is an ‘outer darkness’ reserved for those who have ‘hate[d] the fire of God’. A time when:

God withdraws from a man as far as that can be without the man’s ceasing to be; when the man feels himself abandoned, hanging in a ceaseless vertigo of existence upon the verge of the gulf of his being, without support, without refuge, without aim, without end—for the soul has no weapons wherewith to destroy herself—with no inbreathing of joy, with nothing to make life good.⁷¹⁴

It is a place, though, where the fire of God burns, but where human perception is dulled, and divine manifestation is more ominous:

The outer darkness is but the most dreadful form of the consuming fire—the fire without light—the darkness visible, the black flame. God hath withdrawn himself, but not lost his hold. His face

⁷⁰⁹ Valdemar Adolph Thisted and George MacDonald, *Letters from Hell* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1885), p. viii (a book which may have inspired Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*).

⁷¹⁰ *AF*, II, p. 195.

⁷¹¹ ‘George Macdonald on Dante: Reprinted from the *Glasgow Evening News*, Sept. 18, 1889’, *Wingfold*, 89 (2015), 31–38 (p. 37).

⁷¹² *AF*, III, p. 266.

⁷¹³ For example, ‘I believe that no hell will be lacking which would help the just mercy of God to redeem his children’ (*US3*, p. 155).

⁷¹⁴ *US1*, p. 47.

is turned away, but his hand is laid upon him still. His heart has ceased to beat into the man's heart, but he keeps him alive by his fire.⁷¹⁵

The fire of God's presence, therefore, all-pervasive and sustaining of life, is equally present at heart and skirt of a universe of which this material, created order is but one aspect. But to speak of a 'created order' is misleading, for in this idealist universe 'creation' is more a moment, an aspect of (conscious) being, rather than an ontic reality. The continuum of God's presence is perceived 'morally': the child perceives God as love, and its location as being at the heart of this loving universe in the embrace of God; the rebel perceives God as the dark fire of 'hate', and its location as being in exile at the periphery of existence.

This leads to a broadly universalist position on the basis that it is unlikely that those experiencing the hellfire of God will resist God's love for ever, yet does nevertheless appear to admit the possibility of annihilation as the final end of the unrepentant. However, the above sermon ends on a note of hope:

But at length, O God, wilt thou not cast Death and Hell into the lake of Fire—even into thine own consuming self? Death shall then die everlastingly,

And Hell itself will pass away,

And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.⁷¹⁶

Elsewhere, using an image from Burns, he says: 'All the snow that fell on [the river] vanished, as death and hell shall one day vanish in the fire of God.'⁷¹⁷ He summarises thus:

Hell is God's and not the devil's. Hell is on the side of God and man, to free the child of God from the corruption of death. Not one soul will ever be redeemed from hell but by being saved from his sins, from the evil in him. If hell be needful to save him, hell will blaze [...] until he takes refuge in the will of the Father.⁷¹⁸

In an important respect, he argues, the biblical 'messengers of the good tidings' have been misunderstood. We are not threatened punishment for the sins we have committed; the message 'is of forgiveness, not of vengeance; of deliverance, not of evil to come,' continuing:

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid. The quote is from Milton's 'Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity'.

⁷¹⁷ *AF*, I, p. 131; discussed by Coleridge, *Collected Works*, I, p. 80 (ch. 4).

⁷¹⁸ *HG*, pp. 8–9.

Not for anything he has committed do they threaten a man with the outer darkness. Not for any or all of his sins that are past shall a man be condemned; not for the worst of them needs he dread remaining unforgiven. *The sin he dwells in, the sin he will not come out of, is the sole ruin of a man.*⁷¹⁹

While MacDonald's universalism is generally accepted (he suggests Judas and Satan will find refuge in God)⁷²⁰ it does not equate, as some have complained, to a naive view that God simply hugs everyone, no matter what.⁷²¹ suffering is sometimes necessary to deliver humans from sin. If a sinner does not respond to this therapy, with perhaps a nod to Jonathan Edwards he concludes: 'There would, I presume, be nothing left for God but to set his foot upon him and crush him, as we would crush a noxious insect.'⁷²² It *will* result in the 'destruction of the sinner', although he regards this a defeat for God:

We need look for no more hell, but for the destruction of sin by the destruction of the sinner. That, however, would, it appears to me, be for God to suffer defeat, blameless indeed, but defeat.⁷²³

The somewhat macabre poem 'The Lost Soul', for example, appears to countenance annihilation. A shrivelled soul, once a self-wise philosopher, lies in 'insensate gloom'. Another soul, watching this 'death', empathetically senses destruction:

As if I lay in thy grave,
I feel the Infinite sucking back
The individual life it gave.
Thy spring died to a pool, deep, black,
Which the sun from its pit did lave.⁷²⁴

The 'Infinite sucking back [of] individual life' is a strong metaphor for annihilation, and the poem includes the lines:

⁷¹⁹ Ibid., p. 9 (emphasis mine).

⁷²⁰ *US1*, pp. 94–95; see also *US3*, p. 241f. See note 726.

⁷²¹ George McCrie objects to the image of God with his arms wide open to accept sinners 'without the need for any interposed Mediator', describing it as 'effeminate, silly sentimentalism' (*The Religion of Our Literature*, p. 303).

⁷²² *Salted with Fire* (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1897; Eureka, CA: Sunrise Books, 1989), p. 325.

⁷²³ *US3*, p. 129. This idea is not new. Leibniz, for example, writes:

Yet [...] objections multiply [...] when one considers salvation and damnation: for it appears strange that, even in the great future of eternity, evil should have the advantage over good, under the supreme authority of him who is the sovereign good, since there will be many that are called and few that are chosen or are saved. [...] Sundry pious persons, learned also, but daring, have revived the opinion of Origen, who maintains that good will predominate in due time, in all and everywhere, and that all rational creatures, even the bad angels, will become at last holy and blessed (*Theodicy*, p. 132, §17).

⁷²⁴ *A Hidden Life and Other Poems* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1864; Eureka, CA: Sunrise, 1988), p. 163.

It lies alone in its lifeless world,
 As a frozen bud on the earth lies curled
 Sightless and soundless, without a cry,
 On the flat of its own vacuity.

In the 1893 version, these lines are rendered:

Like a frost-killed bud on a tombstone curled,
 Crumbling it lies on its crumbling world,
 Sightless and deaf, with never a cry,
 In the hell of its own vacuity!⁷²⁵

The words ‘insensate’, ‘tombstone’, ‘frost-killed bud’ and ‘vacuity’ strongly imply annihilation, so despite a strong consensus regarding MacDonald’s universalism⁷²⁶ I believe the jury is out. His views echo those of Maurice, summarised by Geoffrey Rowell thus:

It would be wrong to describe Maurice as a universalist, for universalism states as a dogmatic certainty that all men will be eventually saved, and Maurice suspected the certainty of system. There is no doubt, however, that his understanding of God led him to hope that all men would eventually be saved.⁷²⁷

Maurice, like MacDonald after him, was suspicious of systems but full of hope:

We do not want theories of Universalism; they are as cold, hard, unsatisfactory, as all other theories. But we want that clear, broad assertion of the Divine Charity which the Bible makes, and which carries us immeasurably beyond all that we can ask or think.⁷²⁸

Such ‘larger hope’ had been expressed by Erskine in 1827—‘that loving support to all who dared preach universal redemption’⁷²⁹—and his words sum up the prevailing mood among subscribers:

I have a hope (which I would not willingly think contrary to the revelation of mercy) of the ultimate salvation of all. I trust that He who came to bruise the serpent’s head will not cease His work

⁷²⁵ *Poetical Works*, II, pp. 36–37.

⁷²⁶ One early commentator speaks of ‘[h]is universalism—his belief in the ultimate restoration to goodness and to God of every human soul even of that first and greatest of prodigals, the Devil’ (‘Interesting Discourse at St. Paul’s by Dr. Hunter on George MacDonald (Reprinted from the *Meridian Morning Record*, [CT] June 7, 1910’, *Wingfold*, 89 (2015), 23–25 (p. 25)). In 1910, John Hunter had a lecture entitled: ‘George MacDonald: novelist, poet, preacher, prophet of Universalism’ (Barbara Amell, “‘A Man of Beatitudes’: George MacDonald and John Hunter”, *Wingfold*, 89 (2015), 13–22 (p. 22). Raepel notes that MacDonald had ‘suffered over the Universalist issue’ (*GM*, p. 242). See also Rolland Hein, *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker* (Nashville: Star Song, 1993), pp. 81–82.

⁷²⁷ *Hell and the Victorians*, p. 88.

⁷²⁸ *Theological Essays*, p. 442.

⁷²⁹ *GMAW*, p. 194.

of compassion until He has expelled the fatal poison from every individual of our race. I humbly think that the promise bears this wide interpretation.⁷³⁰

It is clear, however, that MacDonald does *not* believe in anything approaching the doctrine of eternal punishment. We find many illustrations of this. For example, in *Alec Forbes*, Annie has just witnessed the death of her uncle. She then leaves the house, following the river to the old churchyard where her father lies buried:

There was no church: its memory even had vanished. It seemed as if the churchyard had swallowed the church as the heavenly light shall one day swallow the sun and the moon; and the lake of divine fire shall swallow death and hell.⁷³¹

Against this backdrop, human salvation is conceived in terms of orientation (whether one is facing or rejecting the fire of God) rather than position or status (resulting from entering into a contractual agreement or subscribing to a ‘plan of salvation’), the latter exemplary of a perennial danger he highlights in his work—of believing things *about* Christ rather than believing *in* Christ. Rather than accepting ‘the paltry contrivance of a juggling morality, which they attribute to God and his Christ, imagining it the atonement, and “the plan of salvation,”’ the question he wants answered is: ‘Do you put faith in *him*, [...] or in the doctrines and commandments of men?’⁷³²

Without minimising the import of this-life choice, the focus on ‘orientation’ recognises that the *epektasis* of the soul is a trajectory which intersects with, and punctures, death. (Tolkien rightly observed that MacDonald was obsessed with death, but this does not necessarily imply a morbidity, rather a celebration of death as the doorway to the divine embrace.)⁷³³ Post-mortem salvation is a possibility, as is the need for a purgatorial ‘clearing up’ operation on those who call themselves Christians but are addicted to ‘*things*’—‘fettters of gold’.⁷³⁴ But of particular

⁷³⁰ ‘Venice, 2d January 1827’, *Letters Erskine*, p. 71.

⁷³¹ *AF*, III, p. 195.

⁷³² *US2*, p. 247.

⁷³³ ‘Tree and Leaf’, in *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wootton Major, the Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (London: Unwin, 1975) (p. 67).

⁷³⁴ *US2*, pp. 38–39.

concern are ‘schemes of salvation’ which exclude large swathes of humanity such as the ‘good Brahmin’,⁷³⁵ savages,⁷³⁶ or the suicide.

Salvation is thus an ongoing process rather than a one-off event; the child must make daily choices to be obedient. MacDonald’s remarks along the lines of ‘I don’t care what you believe’⁷³⁷ here come into focus, for no ‘plan of salvation’ or belief in a ‘correct’ theory of atonement can substitute for this daily, relational walk with Christ who, through his Spirit, leads towards truth: ‘for to hold a thing with the intellect, is not to believe it. A man’s real belief is that which he lives by.’⁷³⁸

There is a corresponding rejection of any notion that the work of Christ ‘imputes’ righteousness or ‘covers’ unrighteousness; this, like the emperor’s new clothes, is illusory. He appeals to the Apostle John for support:

There is no clothing in a robe of imputed righteousness, that poorest of legal cobwebs spun by spiritual spiders. To me it seems like an invention of well-meaning dulness [*sic*] to soothe insanity; and indeed it has proved a door of escape out of worse imaginations. It is apparently an old ‘doctrine;’ for St. John seems to point at it where he says, ‘Little children, let no man lead you astray; he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous’.⁷³⁹

Righteousness, therefore, is an ongoing, obedient response to divine forgiveness, and ‘salvation’ involves turning to God with a childlike heart. But how is this achieved?

5.6 (b) The Christ event

We now outline key aspects of MacDonald’s soteriology.

Two fundamental concerns drive his articulation of the Christ event which he expresses thus: ‘the worst heresy, next to that of dividing religion and righteousness, is to divide the Father from the Son’.⁷⁴⁰ The first division leads to a religion of belief (theory) rather than faith (obedience); the second creates the conditions for the false notion that Jesus shields us from the angry Father. Both are summarised in his objection to the idea of imputed righteousness:

⁷³⁵ *Falconer*, II, p. 97.

⁷³⁶ *US3*, p. 34.

⁷³⁷ For example: ‘Opinion, right or wrong, will do nothing to save him. [...] With his opinions, true or false, I have nothing to do’ (*ibid.*, p. 139).

⁷³⁸ *US2*, p. 239.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–04; 1 Jn 3.7.

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

That is, that, by a sort of legal fiction, Jesus was treated as what he was not, in order that we might be treated as what we are not. This is the best device, according to the prevailing theology, that the God of truth, the God of mercy, whose glory is that he is just to men by forgiving their sins, could fall upon for saving his creatures!⁷⁴¹

As John McLeod Campbell had noted in 1848 (also using the term ‘legal fiction’), it implied ‘a demand in the divine nature for a certain amount of suffering as the punishment of a certain amount of sin’, and that Christ was ‘actually in His Father’s eyes as a criminal through imputation of man’s sin’—an idea ‘that men have revolted from’.⁷⁴²

MacDonald’s objection is that the imputation of righteousness of which Paul speaks concerns Abraham being considered righteous because of *his own* faith, not because of the faith of another: ‘To impute the righteousness of one to another, is simply an act of falsehood; to call the faith of a man his righteousness is simply to speak the truth.’⁷⁴³ The alternative he offers is that God forgives sins (past sinful deeds), but must destroy the inclination to sinfulness: ‘Let me be regarded as the sinner I am; for nothing will serve my need but to be made a righteous man, one that will no more sin.’⁷⁴⁴ In his view:

Christ died to save us, not from suffering, but from ourselves; not from injustice, far less from justice, but from being unjust. He died that we might live—but live as he lives, by dying as he died who died to himself that he might live unto God.⁷⁴⁵

It is an emphasis on sanctification—‘growing in and toward righteousness’⁷⁴⁶—rather than salvation. Salvation is viewed as the destination of the Christian journey rather than its starting point; union with God, rather than creating the conditions for that union; a process rather than an act. On this journey, God ‘swallows up all our imperfections, all our defects, all our evils’,⁷⁴⁷ which, as Presbyterian George McCrie fumes, entails ‘small need of the blood, or for anything more than an exercise of magnanimity’.⁷⁴⁸ His colleague Samuel Law Wilson is like-

⁷⁴¹ US3, p. 210.

⁷⁴² *The Nature of the Atonement* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1848), p. 67.

⁷⁴³ US3, p. 213.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁷⁴⁷ Note 550, page 122.

⁷⁴⁸ *The Religion of Our Literature*, p. 302.

wise offended: it reduces conversion to a ‘slight and facile process’ that involves little more than a human decision to do better, ignoring ‘the awful controversy caused by sin’.⁷⁴⁹

The clearest statement of MacDonald’s soteriology is in the polemical sermon ‘Justice’: God forgives past sin; through Christ we have the power to overcome present sin—the inclination towards sinfulness. He argues here, as we noted earlier,⁷⁵⁰ that there is no essential ‘schizophrenic’ opposition between God’s justice and God’s mercy, and his starting point is Psalm 62:12 which (in his KJV) reads:

Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy: for thou renderest to every man according to his work.

The ‘religious mind’ would substitute ‘justice’ for ‘mercy’⁷⁵¹ leading to the question, ‘How could he be a just God and not punish sin?’⁷⁵² To which he replies: mercy only exists, or is necessary, because sin exists; if there was no sin there would be no need for God to exercise mercy. In which case, are not mercy and justice in God equivalents?

If God punish sin, it must be merciful to punish sin; and if God forgive sin, it must be just to forgive sin. We are required to forgive, with the argument that our father forgives. It must, I say, be right to forgive. Every attribute of God must be infinite as himself. He cannot be sometimes merciful, and not always merciful. He cannot be just, and not always just. Mercy belongs to him, and needs no contrivance of theologic chicanery to justify it.⁷⁵³

If punishment were somehow an offset for sin, then ‘God would be bound to punish for the sake of the punishment; but he cannot be, for he forgives’,⁷⁵⁴ leading to the assertion:

Primarily, God is not bound to *punish* sin; he is bound to *destroy* sin.

[...]

Punishment, I repeat, is not the thing required of God, but the absolute destruction of sin.⁷⁵⁵

Erskine before him, ‘alarmed at the state of religious teaching in Scotland’, had expressed similar views. ‘Everywhere’, he wrote, ‘salvation from punishment was substituted for salvation

⁷⁴⁹ Note 84.

⁷⁵⁰ Section 5.2 (e).

⁷⁵¹ *US3*, p. 109.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–20.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 121–22.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 123.

from sin, and sin itself was conceived as a series of particular offences, rather than as the whole state of man's alienation from God.⁷⁵⁶ Instead, 'the absolute destruction of sin' is needed: God freeing God's children from sin's power, the starting point being the repentance of the culpable individual that recognises and 'loathes' the sin in its being. Jesus died to give humans the power to overcome sinfulness:

Repentance, restitution, confession, prayer for forgiveness, righteous dealing thereafter, is the sole possible, the only true make-up for sin. For nothing less than this did Christ die.

[...]

[T]he work of Jesus Christ on earth was the creative atonement, because it works atonement in every heart. He brings and is bringing God and man, and man and man, into perfect unity: 'I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfect in one.'⁷⁵⁷

It is a prioritising of declarations that Christ came to neutralise the power of evil (such as Heb. 2:14–15) and a rejection of what are considered misinterpretations of passages that imply that righteousness is a 'substance' that can be somehow imputed to a sinner (such as 2 Cor. 5:21).

In short, since the problem of evil is couched primarily in terms of enslaved human will, Christ creates the conditions for that will to make a genuinely free choice to return to the Father. It reflects the Maurician emphasis on the deepest place in the universe being the love of God, relegating sin to a temporary state that ends with the repentance, not the destruction, of the sinner. It is a cosmology—and therefore a soteriology—based on the premise that:

There is nothing eternal but that which loves and can be loved, and love is ever climbing towards the consummation when such shall be the universe, imperishable, divine.

Therefore all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that comes between and is not of love's kind, must be destroyed.⁷⁵⁸

Speech about 'growing into childhood' reflects two priorities that characterise an acceptable response: first, that 'childhood' is the essence and goal of human nature since this is the divine 'idea of the universe', and second, that it is not a one-off salvation event, but an on-going choice to be obedient. Humans *grow* into childhood: like Swedenborg's angels, they be-

⁷⁵⁶ *Hell and the Victorians*, pp. 72–73.

⁷⁵⁷ *US3*, pp. 128–29 (Jn. 17.23).

⁷⁵⁸ *US1*, p. 28.

come progressively younger, and, like Gregory of Nyssa's soul, 'expand' and become more divine as the journey towards God progresses. As MacDonald put it, writing towards the end of his life: 'If we are not little ones of a perfect love, I can see no sense in things.'⁷⁵⁹

It is evident that MacDonald fails to account for the negative and destructive forces embedded in this 'system of Soul-making' that genuinely damage creaturely well-being by acting *on* a person, rather than being the result of individual sin, particularly the thorny issue of destructive natural events, disease, or suffering that, if attributed to God, would imply suspect divine morality. Neither does he consider consequential evil: that, since we are located in a finite world, even with 'the best (childlike) will in the world', human decisions may have destructive implications for others. The refrains 'all will be well', and 'a great good is coming'⁷⁶⁰ are comforting, but they look to eschatological resolution without addressing 'earthly' issues which, as David Kelsey insists, should really be on the table if theology is to do its job.⁷⁶¹ These are issues to be borne in mind as we read further.

⁷⁵⁹ 'To Lady Mount Temple, October 22, 1893', *Letters GM*, p. 357.

⁷⁶⁰ The family motto was 'Corage! God mend al!', an anagram of his name; as *Phantastes* draws to a close, the protagonist hears nature whisper: "'A great good is coming—is coming—is coming to thee, Anodos;'" and so over and over again' (*Phantastes* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1858), p. 322).

⁷⁶¹ *EE*, p. 212.

Chapter 6 Critiquing the Evangelical world from fairyland

6.1 MacDonald's *via media*

The increasingly vocal defence of ‘*The Truth!*’⁷⁶² by parties within Evangelicalism forms the backdrop to MacDonald’s thought. As explored in Chapter 1, the picture is one of a church divided by contrasting responses to external pressures. While located in a wider ecclesial battle for survival, the skirmish between Evangelical conservatives and liberals exercises MacDonald because his personal journey was a migration from the former to the latter. However, although broadly ‘liberal’—and certainly anti-conservative—he offers another perspective which challenges both by questioning the validity of truth-claims; truth, he argues, must be appropriated ‘aesthetically’ by imaginatively discerning its symbolic and metaphorical nature. Although ostensibly making him vulnerable to the charge of subjectivism, he is suggesting that so-called external ‘facts’ relating to religion are just as illusory and that—since phenomenally perceived by human consciousness—claims to validity are not as strong as supposed.

In this chapter we explore MacDonald’s *via media*, his alternative to rationalist methodologies which, in his view, had lost connection with reality, ‘reality’ for MacDonald being a cosmos redolent with God’s immanent presence in nature and in human consciousness providing a wider context in which to evaluate the fruits of logic. One way of exploring that wider context is MacDonald’s use of fairy children. As we look through the eyes of the fairy child in his narratives, he suggests a new way of seeing the world, particularly the Evangelical world.

MacDonald’s questionable account of evil is, I shall argue, a reaction to even more questionable accounts. We begin by exploring the conservative and liberal Evangelical perspectives against which he is reacting, noting that the polarities described here represent the extremes of a spectrum of views. Negative criticism should not distract from the fact that Evangelicalism as a whole was having its time in the sun and making a positive impact on British society. Evangelicals were generally associated with ‘the cultivation of vital Christianity’.⁷⁶³

⁷⁶² From a scene in *Lilith* explored in Chapter 7 (page 210).

⁷⁶³ *Dominance of Evangelicalism*, p. 235.

6.2 Evangelical views of evil

6.2 (a) The conservative view

The antagonism between conservative and liberal Evangelicals arguably led to a sense of unreality in the theology of both, that is, a disconnect between theological claims and lived experience; that propositions, although ‘logical’, did not ‘ring true’. For example, the conservative insistence on a young earth and a literal fire of eternal hell was undermined by scientific (in the former case) or moral (in the latter case) objections. Critics touched a raw nerve when challenging the veracity of conservative truth-claims, often provoking a vehement response since the foundations of faith were at stake. As Nicholas Lash observes:

Perhaps only a faith that has lost its nerve feels obliged continually to insist that it is quite sure of itself, and knows quite clearly what is to be said concerning the mystery of God.⁷⁶⁴

Retreat, resulting in increasing polarisation, ensued, the most notable example being Spurgeon, who declared his inability to fellowship with those in the Baptist Union who denied the ‘real gospel’. As Hopkins notes, his refusal to engage personally in the debates surrounding the ‘down grade’ controversy added to its acidity,⁷⁶⁵ and ‘Spurgeon’s views on holiness and sin sufficed unaided to set up a barrier between himself and the entire spectrum of contemporary liberal theological revision’.⁷⁶⁶

The conservative inability to accept the liberal position that truth was ‘relational’—that is, contingent upon cultural and conscious engagement with it—led to the defence of traditional Evangelical orthodoxy. Criticism of such received orthodoxy centred around the problem of evil: the perception that God was not so much addressing the issue of evil as responsible for it; that the ‘plan of salvation’ on offer was subtly artificial; that eternal torment implied a morally corrupt deity; and that the proposition that humans were entirely depraved was untenable. Words like ‘darkness’, ‘inflexibility’, and ‘hardness’ were frequently used to describe the extreme forms of Calvinism, said to foster a severe view of life, even madness. Christopher

⁷⁶⁴ *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), p. 31. Charley Osbourne remarks that his father’s abusive and defensive behaviour is because, ‘He’s afraid [his religion] mayn’t be true after all’ (*Cumbermede*, p. 173).

⁷⁶⁵ *Nonconformity’s Romantic Generation*, p. 230.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

White's review of American Christianity in the years 1830–1880, for example, notes that incidences of anxiety tending towards madness were not uncommon:

Liberals across the spectrum—from free-preaching frontier Universalists and Congregationalists to urbane Unitarians—thought Calvinism promoted an unhealthy piety that made believers hopeless and mentally unstable. Different symptoms resulted—an infirm body, poor mental development, depression, insomnia, insanity.

The case of Elizabeth Cady Stanton—who later became a 'disenchanted Evangelical'⁷⁶⁷—illustrates the practical effects of the doctrine of election which so troubled Annie in *Alec Forbes*, amplified by Thomas Cramm's efforts to get her 'convertit':

The young [...] Stanton was terrified about salvation and was caught in a paralyzing conviction of her inability. Though she somehow mustered a moment of joyful conversion, her relief was cut short by Charles G. Finney's incessant harpings on "the depravity and deceitfulness of the human heart." Had her heart fooled her into thinking she had been saved? What could she do? How could she know?⁷⁶⁸

White notes that such heart-searching was not a by-product of Calvinism but, like Manning's sermon from a Tractarian perspective,⁷⁶⁹ one of its goals: 'Calvinist doctrines were intended to produce an anxious alertness, an unsettling conviction of total sinfulness' from which there was no escape. MacDonald, likewise, speaks of those who—

lie wasting themselves in soul-sickening self-examination as to whether they are believers, whether they are really trusting in the atonement, whether they are truly sorry for their sins—the way to madness of the brain, and despair of the heart.⁷⁷⁰

The picture is confirmed by a recent study of the effects of strict Calvinism in one of the last areas in Scotland where it survives in its most Federal form—the island of Lewis. Here, the church divides people into the elect and the reprobate, denying the latter access not just to communion but to the communion service. Like MacDonald's sketch of the disturbed Charley whose repressive religious father dominates the skyline of his son's life, the result here is 'a

⁷⁶⁷ *Evangelical Disenchantment*, pp. 92–113.

⁷⁶⁸ Christopher G. White, 'Minds Intensely Unsettled: Phrenology, Experience, and the American Pursuit of Spiritual Assurance, 1830–1880', *Religion and American Culture*, 16 (2006), 227–61 (p. 231).

⁷⁶⁹ Note 228.

⁷⁷⁰ *US2*, p. 244.

profound sense of guilt' leading to increased incidences of depression and suicide that have been linked directly to Calvinist preaching.⁷⁷¹

Those doing the preaching were not immune. R. W. Dale, for example, as assistant minister pressured to teach the 'old theology' under the watchful eye of his predecessor at Carrs Lane Congregational Church in Birmingham, John Angell James, speaks of '[s]easons of depression, heavy, terrible, overwhelming, come over me';⁷⁷² Spurgeon also, having earlier in his career relished the preaching of damnation, later said the doctrine gave him 'the bitterest anguish of spirit'.⁷⁷³ Echoing Iain McGilchrist's observation that at the Reformation 'the Flesh is made Word',⁷⁷⁴ the author of the Isle of Lewis report concludes:

What we have is a religion of words instead of an encounter with the living Word, words that have been made into an idolatry and substitute for what they represent. From a psychoanalytic perspective, what we have here is a schizoid faith, split away from incarnation, from the flesh and guts of the world, withdrawn from involvement in the world's suffering, from its history, its politics, its economics.⁷⁷⁵

That this represents extreme conservative Calvinism (Law's accusation)⁷⁷⁶ is admitted; the issue, however, is that such 'hard' views were always in the background in the nineteenth century, bleeding into the softer forms of Evangelicalism. As Mark Johnson observes, the forced marriage of the 'moderate Calvinism' of the early part of the century (election) to Evangelicalism (Christ died for all) resulted in 'a confused mixture',⁷⁷⁷ one that in the eyes of MacDonald had never exorcised the demons of the past. Rather than account for evil, many critics considered conservative theology a source of evil. In short, the conservative theological account of evil, and its practical consequences, did not (at least for the sceptical) 'ring true'.

⁷⁷¹ Iain A. M. Macritchie, 'Celtic Culture, Calvinism, Social and Mental Health on the Island of Lewis', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 33 (1994), 269–78 (pp. 274–75). Greville MacDonald notes: 'In the Island of Lewis the ministers of the Secession Church had compelled the destruction of pipes and fiddles. "If there was a foolish man [...] who demurred, the good ministers and the good elders themselves broke and burned their instruments, saying: "Better is the small fire that warms on the little day of peace | Than the big fire that burns on the great day of wrath."'" (*GMAW*, p. 29, n. 2); the quotation is from Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, 1900). (See note 230.)

⁷⁷² *Dissolution of Dissent*, p. 45.

⁷⁷³ *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation*, pp. 150–51.

⁷⁷⁴ Note 566.

⁷⁷⁵ 'Celtic Culture, Calvinism, Social and Mental Health on the Island of Lewis', p. 276.

⁷⁷⁶ Page 10.

⁷⁷⁷ *Dissolution of Dissent*, p. 13.

6.2 (b) The liberal view

The same, however, could be said of the liberal position. Conservatives accused liberals of being ‘effeminate’ and ‘sentimental’, particularly those of a more Romantic persuasion such as the Congregational minister Thomas Toke Lynch (for MacDonald, ‘a man of true insight and large heart’).⁷⁷⁸ The issue came into focus in 1855 when Lynch published an inoffensive book of devotional poems called *The Rivulet: a Contribution to Sacred Song*, a work having an ‘obvious debt to the romantic spirit’ illustrating the rise of a subjectivism that was seen as the polar opposite to the objectivity of the old school giving rise to what was termed ‘The New Theology’.⁷⁷⁹ Like William Hale White, who attributed his escape from Congregationalism to the ministrations of Wordsworth,⁷⁸⁰ Lynch too—though a poor poet—was clearly influenced by his hero. Nature imagery abounds, and we are treated to stanzas such as:

Flowers will not cease to speak
And tell the praise of God
Even to the careless man
Who has upon them trod.
[...]
Pure juices sweetened by the skies
Are in the grass; and, look!
There feeds the lamb for sacrifice
In meadows by the brook.⁷⁸¹

These lines would perhaps have benefitted from the oblivion of history had it not been for John Campbell’s heated objections. Campbell, who had been the Congregational minister at Moorfields Tabernacle in London in the 1830s–1840s and then the self-appointed spokesman for Evangelical conservatism through his platform as the editor of Congregational publications,

⁷⁷⁸ Orts, p. 220.

⁷⁷⁹ *English Nonconformity*, p. 106. Influential Congregationalist R. W. Dale wrote *The Old Evangelicalism and the New* in 1889. Old Evangelicalism was the conversionist theology of the Evangelical Revival, however with a focus that Christ died for all men (unlike the ‘Old Dissent’ of Calvinist Puritanism); the New Evangelicalism suggested that old dissenters had lived a ‘cloistered existence in their preoccupation with personal salvation [...] withdrawn from wider responsibilities of citizenship’ (*Dissolution of Dissent*, p. 6).

⁷⁸⁰ *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*, p. 19.

⁷⁸¹ *The Rivulet* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1868), pp. 7, 154.

had become increasingly obsessed [in the late 1840s] with what he correctly saw to be an erosion of the orthodox evangelicalism, or the moderate Calvinism of the Congregational churches [...] he singled out “an increase in German error”.⁷⁸²

Campbell saw *The Rivulet* as anything but inoffensive, rather the first trickle of a liberal inundation in danger of swamping true Christianity. Lynch was, according to another critic (one James Grant), ‘pervaded throughout by the Rationalist Theology of Germany’.⁷⁸³ Such Romantic ‘rationalism’ was, ironically, seen as producing an excess of speculation and imagination. MacDonald, for example, stood accused of:

the enthronement of the individual consciousness over any objective rule of faith.

[...]

[A theory] which discredits the authority of Scripture, and leaves every man free to shape his own theology according to his own tastes, feelings, and even prejudices, [and] is Rationalism, pure and simple.⁷⁸⁴

Neither Darwin’s conclusion that nature was demon-designed, or Tennyson’s view that it was ‘red in tooth and claw’, nor the conservative view that both humanity and nature were intrinsically corrupt were compatible with Goethe’s view of nature as God’s robe. As Spurgeon had pessimistically put it: ‘the best we can do with this world is to get through it as quickly as we can, for we dwell in an enemy’s country’,⁷⁸⁵ and, as Campbell pointed out, Lynch’s own words betrayed him: nature was not as benign or numinous as those such as he claimed:

O, the bright and vast creation
Can be terrible and stern,
From its stroke be no salvation,
Though on every side we turn:
Lord of nature, Lord of nature,
Then to Thee our spirits yearn.⁷⁸⁶

The optimistic view of human nature was also criticised for ignoring ‘the awful controversy caused by sin’,⁷⁸⁷ a phrase summative of the conservative view that Romantic liberalism

⁷⁸² *Dissolution of Dissent*, p. 16.

⁷⁸³ *Dominance of Evangelicalism*, p. 156.

⁷⁸⁴ *The Theology of Modern Literature*, pp. 316, 317.

⁷⁸⁵ *Nonconformity’s Romantic Generation*, p. 150.

⁷⁸⁶ *The Rivulet*, p. 109 (emphasis mine); discussed in *The Dissenters*, p. 9.

⁷⁸⁷ Wilson (note 84).

was deficient in its account of reality, particularly relating to sin. Not only did the Romantic view of reality undermine conservative Evangelical orthodoxy, it also (for the sceptical) did not ‘ring true’.

6.3 ‘A little world of his own’—the view from fairyland

MacDonald would, I believe, have applauded Chesterton’s views on madness:

Imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do. [...] I am not, as will be seen, in any sense attacking logic: I only say that this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination.⁷⁸⁸

However, if extreme ‘logical’ conservatism caused madness, then Romantic liberalism, one might say, tended towards blindness. Both ‘views’ of reality arguably resulted in an inability to see truly, to account for the world experienced by human consciousness. MacDonald offers an alternative perspective by using his ‘fairy vision’⁷⁸⁹—by viewing the world through the eyes of a fairy child, a fantasy creation of mid nineteenth century Romanticism and therefore prone to a somewhat over-optimistic view of the world, but one attempting, nevertheless, to see clearly and through whose eyes we survey a sometimes bleak, often idealised, landscape. Unlike the children of Calvinism, this Coleridgean child prioritises imaginative vision on the understanding that imagination is a ‘repetition in the finite mind of the I AM’; it is also, therefore, a divine agent. From fairyland, from the other side of Chesterton’s hedge,⁷⁹⁰ it gives us a fresh perspective on the world of humans. The confusion comes when this child, one such as Gibbie, visits the real world. Before exploring this approach in MacDonald’s fantasy text *Lilith*, we critically consider MacDonald’s thought experiment.

At the outset, it is important to make the distinction between the ideal and the fantastic. The former is a state of affairs that might be possible in a world of perfection. As evil exists, the ideal is always unattainable in the present quotidian context but nevertheless may dictate a legitimate course of action which is a moral good. The fantastic only exists in fairyland and repre-

⁷⁸⁸ *Orthodoxy* (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 2001), pp. 10–11. In Chesterton’s opinion, ‘only one great English poet went mad, Cowper. And he was definitely driven mad by logic, by the ugly and alien logic of predestination’ (ibid., p. 5).

⁷⁸⁹ Page 29.

⁷⁹⁰ *Orthodoxy*, p. 47.

sents a state of affairs unattainable in the quotidian world but which may nevertheless throw the nature of that world into relief. One problem we face in MacDonald is the blurring of the boundaries between the real (the human proximate context), the ideal, the fantastic, and the transcendent—the latter being, in MacDonald’s scheme, that which exists in God’s imagination beyond present human knowledge, elements of which might be abductively revealed by the Spirit.

To give an example: F. D. Maurice’s ‘brotherhood of man’ theology led to a belief that the prime need was not for evangelism aimed at transferring people into the kingdom of God, but waking people to knowledge of their present status as members of it. Thus the task of the evangelist was to:

[call forth] the heart and conscience of men, so that being first able to see their Father in heaven truly, and themselves in their true relation to Him, they may afterwards manfully investigate, as I am sure they will long to do, the conditions under which they themselves, His children, exist.⁷⁹¹

This optimism underpinning Maurice’s Christian Socialism, that men—especially poor men—would ‘manfully investigate the conditions under which they exist’, is dramatized in *Robert Falconer*. Falconer, a superhero who appears to know most Londoners by name and can fell recalcitrant policemen with a single blow without charges being pressed,⁷⁹² offers some advice to a destitute Spitalfields weaver. The narrator notes:

This man had lost his wife and three children, his whole family except a daughter now sick, by a slow-consuming hunger; and he did not believe there was a God that ruled in the earth. But he supported his unbelief by no other argument than a hopeless bitter glance at his empty loom.⁷⁹³

Unbelief rather than unemployment is the main issue. To wake his ‘higher nature’ he is admonished to snap out of it and serve his even more impoverished neighbours on the basis that—

the nature of the Son of Man was in him, and that to get him to do as the Son of Man did, in ever so small a degree, was the readiest means of bringing his higher nature to the birth.⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹¹ *Theological Essays*, p. 29.

⁷⁹² *Falconer*, III, pp. 113–114.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*, III, p. 91.

Being already a child, indwelt by the Spirit, all is needed is obedience to the initial spark of revelation to fan the fire of faith.

In such ways MacDonald was mediating his understanding of Maurice's academic prose to a wider audience, and I suggest that the process, the creative process of dramatizing that theology, reveals its shortcomings—not necessarily shortcomings in Maurice's theology, but in MacDonald's interpretation of Maurice. There is often a naivety, sentimentality, and unreality prompting one critic of the novel *Guild Court*, for example, to observe that 'he might as well have located his characters in Eden or in the planet Mars'.⁷⁹⁵ So how should we read it?

It is clear that Falconer is a Christ figure⁷⁹⁶—the policeman incident reinforces this in that he is somehow above earthly law—but having arrived via fairyland (with Christ-like attributes but nevertheless a product of MacDonald's imagination) has clearly misread the social situation and assumed that either God has ordained poverty or that inequality is inconsequential compared to the more fundamental issue of 'unbelief'. The tableau illustrates the admissible proposition that Christ is active in society and humans have a responsibility to acknowledge this, but sets this within a fantastic setting. Purporting to be a picture of nineteenth century London, its idealist caricature is so far from lived experience that the message—the poor must be woken up and work towards their own salvation—is perceived to be a foreign import from fairyland. It is the story of a naive fairy visitor to an ideal world.

Similar comments might be made regarding characters such as Gibbie. Also a Christ-inspired being from fairyland (or 'Eden or the planet Mars') Gibbie's muteness, like Diamond's incoherence,⁷⁹⁷ reinforces his fairy status: his inability to converse with humans (except imperfectly through his wife's intuitive relaying of his wishes or through the cumbersome efforts of writing on a slate)⁷⁹⁸ indicates a fundamental otherness. He does not speak human language. He

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., III, p. 101 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁹⁵ 'Guild Court', *Examiner*, 3121 (1867), p. 741.

⁷⁹⁶ We encounter passages such as: 'While Falconer spoke, his face grew grander and grander, till at last it absolutely shone. I felt that I walked with a man whose faith was his genius' (*Falconer*, III, p. 120). In the previous novel that had introduced the character of Falconer, there is authorial worship: 'His [another 'merely human' character's] love was not a high one—not such as thine, my Falconer. Thine was love indeed' (*David Elginbrod*, III, p. 6).

⁷⁹⁷ Note 316.

⁷⁹⁸ Gibbie does speak three words in the novel. During the flood incident (see page 93), thinking the old shepherd and his wife have been swept away, he cries out, 'O Jesus Christ!' (*Gibbie*, p. 196). Gibbie's muteness, it seems, is a prohibition from God rather than a disability.

cannot relate to, neither does he belong, in the quotidian world, for the world he inhabits, on closer inspection, is on the borders of fairyland where a good fairy is making sure nothing terrible happens. Furthermore, he brings with him a perspective from fairyland which remains unforged in the crucible of human interaction. His belief, in other words, has no need to be refined or challenged in the furnace of conversation; it has no need to evolve. He is essentially a fairy fundamentalist, firmly convinced his dogma is the truth. The proposition that Christ deals with the problem of evil and in some sense absorbs it on behalf of humanity is blunted by the fairy context in that the evil of ‘the grey city’ bears little resemblance to its real-world corrosive counterpart.

The reason for this is simply that MacDonald has projected onto the nineteenth century landscape a Romantic naivety about human nature combined with the prevailing view that social hierarchy is ordained by God, that Church and State are guardians of this hierarchical flock, and it is the divine will that some were born to serve others. There was hitherto little will to change the status quo: literature exploring the education of the poor during the first half of the century, for example, is less concerned about bettering their lot than enabling them to fulfil their divinely-ordained station, and Evangelical children’s literature likewise assumed that this was the norm. In *The Fairchild Family*, for example, John Trueman, the servant of a household that lives in an idyllic leafy suburbia, is described thus:

He was a poor working man, and had a wife and six children. But I should not call him poor: I should rather call him rich; for he had cause to hope that his wife and all his children (that is, all who were old enough to inspire such hopes) had been brought to the knowledge of God; and as for John himself, there was reason to think that he was one of the most faithful servants of God in all the country round.⁷⁹⁹

MacDonald does not, in the main, challenge social roles: his ideal peasants are content with their lot and are the salt of the earth; it is social climbers, such as Rev. Clement Sclater in *Sir Gibbie*, who want to ‘improve’ themselves that endanger social equilibrium. The main sin of the arch-villain in *David Elginbrod*—the Count from Bohemia who uses a ring and powers of

⁷⁹⁹ Mary Martha Sherwood, *The History of the Fairchild Family* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1822), p. 9.

mesmerisation to entrap weak women—is not, it seems, his immoral behaviour but the fact that he is a fallen servant with pretensions beyond his station.⁸⁰⁰

MacDonald, then, is a man of his time with a Romantic perspective. That he tends to turn a blind eye to evil must be acknowledged. That in many ways he accepts the social views of his age must also be acknowledged, but, as we have explored, this does not prevent him making an incisive challenge to male middle class views of women through texts such as *North Wind*, neither is his contribution to the theology of childhood inconsequential. What is of particular interest is MacDonald's use of fantasy to explore and articulate theology.

6.3 (a) The nature of fairyland

In *The Fantastic Imagination*, MacDonald focuses on 'fairy stories' and underlines the legitimacy and purpose of an author 'inventing a little world of his own':

The natural world has its laws [...] but they themselves may suggest laws of other kinds, and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms [...]. When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy: in either case, Law has been diligently at work.⁸⁰¹

The Coleridgean language reinforces the divine source of human imagination, unlike that of fancy which is 'mere invention'.⁸⁰² Both are worthy human endeavours that must conform to 'law'—the nineteenth century was preoccupied with the need to conform to the fundamental divine principles undergirding reality⁸⁰³—but only the former embodies 'truth' understood as something already conceived by God. 'New *forms*' and 'new *embodiments* of old truths' may be new expressions of truth, that is, of divine ideas, but do not add to it.⁸⁰⁴ Unlike Chesterton and Tolkien, for example, for whom an artwork was, in the scholastic sense, a 'thing in itself' radiating its own truth, MacDonald focuses on the human imagination's ability to reflect and embody God's thoughts. Alison Milbank summarises thus:

⁸⁰⁰ He was private secretary to an English knight of the realm, not a Bohemian Count. (*David Elginbrod*, II, p. 146.)

⁸⁰¹ *Orts*, p. 314.

⁸⁰² Page 14.

⁸⁰³ A view which gained wider acceptance after Robert Chambers' anonymous publication of *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). (*Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, pp. 289–90.)

⁸⁰⁴ *Orts*, p. 4.

The distinction between truth and its embodiment [...] is quite foreign to Chesterton and Tolkien's [strongly realist] view of a work of art as a thing in itself [...]. MacDonald strives to the same end as they [to stress the divine origin of art], but has a less positive conception of the value of the material as against the spiritual and disembodied.⁸⁰⁵

Instead of 'spiritual and disembodied', the words 'mental and conscious' might equally be used in recognition of MacDonald's radical idealism. This is particularly evident in the earlier essay *The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture* where the subjective nature of reality is underlined:

For the world is [...] the human being turned inside out. All that moves in the mind is symbolized in Nature. Or, to use another more philosophical, and certainly not less poetic figure, the world is a sensuous analysis of humanity, and hence an inexhaustible wardrobe for the clothing of human thought.⁸⁰⁶

In fairyland, then, as in the real world, 'Law is diligently at work', that is, it is a jurisdiction where divinely-ordained moral principles apply. Because they are divine, 'no man must interfere with them'; the author 'must not meddle with the [moral] relations of live souls'. 'In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take their laws into his invented world as well.'⁸⁰⁷ MacDonald's vision of human creativity thus parallels his vision of human being: just as human being equates to God's thoughts, so fairy being equates to human thoughts. Imagination is not only the connection between them but the ever-present flux of reality—temporal and transcendent—leading to the observation:

if [imagination] be to man what creation is to God, we must expect to find it operative in every sphere of human activity. Such is, indeed, the fact, and that to a far greater extent than is commonly supposed.⁸⁰⁸

Fairyland, therefore—if the genuine product of imagination rather than the 'mere inventions' of fancy—is, being divinely inspired, part of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, if aspects of fairyland *are* fanciful, since fancy must also conform to 'Law' this too can shed light on the nature of reality. The child of fairyland is therefore a child of God. Being a citizen of both fairy-

⁸⁰⁵ Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians (London: T&T Clark Ltd, 2009), p. 143.

⁸⁰⁶ *Orts*, p. 9.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

land and the kingdom of God it has the right to critique the world of humans. However, as the knight remarks to Anados in *Phantastes*, ‘Somehow or other [...] notwithstanding the beauty of this country of Faerie, in which we are, there is much that is wrong with it’.⁸⁰⁹ sin and evil also exist in fairyland (dragons need to be slain) and fairy vision is not necessarily correct vision. Fairies, too, have their preconceptions and biases.

MacDonald views Evangelical liberalism and conservatism (among other things) through the eyes of this fairy child, offering not just an alternative view but a new way of seeing. While it is true that liberals were broadly ‘imaginative’, and conservatives more ‘logical’, it would be wrong simply to categorise them as such. While liberals did indeed lean towards a more imaginative view, both were essentially wedded to ‘scientific’ methodology. The antagonism stemmed less from methodology as from different starting points leading to logically irreconcilable positions: God could not be a benign Father as well as a torturer; humanity could not be both sinless and depraved; the Bible could not be both inerrant and historically contingent; the earth could not be both 4,004 years old (Ussher’s date confidently inscribed in family Bibles) and have evolved, and so on. MacDonald’s fairy child provides a wider perspective, not opposed to intellection, but offering fresh vision to guide its ‘plodding brother, reason’ towards a more contextual understanding.

6.3 (b) Learning to see again—the vision of fairyland

MacDonald is challenging what he saw as naive, sadistic, and juridical caricatures of God. Concrete alternative theological proposals have emerged, but, as MacDonald explicitly states, his goal is not to impart information but to waken imagination. In a positivist age prone to what might be termed cataphatic literalist fundamentalism, MacDonald offers a mystical apophatic theological approach which *apparently* moves truth away from ‘objective’ fact and locates it in human consciousness. However, it has more to do with rejecting the *illusion* of objective fact and locating truth in a wider concept of shared human–divine consciousness.

⁸⁰⁹ *Phantastes*, p. 296.

(i) Making the familiar strange

By leading us into fairyland, MacDonald is giving us new categories with which to view reality by means of two processes. First, there is *making the familiar strange*. With fairy vision we take a fresh and more objective look at the idols that have taken up residence among us. They are familiar, part of the religious landscape, but should they be there? This is dramatized in *Phantastes* where there is a thinly-veiled critique of Reformed religion and the ‘terrible idol’ at its centre.⁸¹⁰ The fantasy tale concerns the quest of Anados (‘on the way up’)⁸¹¹ to find his true identity. False identity results from self-centredness which gives rise to the presence of an evil shadow from which Anados longs to be free (a metaphor for the rebellious self becoming opaque to the light of God’s radiance).⁸¹²

Anados’s emancipation is rendered more likely by his volunteering to serve a knight, a fellow traveller in Faerie whose own redemption is also imminent having slain a dreaded dragon. Knight and squire are travelling through a forest at sundown when they happen upon a religious service taking place in a woodland ‘cathedral’ formed by a rectangle of yew trees. Religious and military architecture is evoked (as is death, as yews are associated with graveyards): gothic ‘trees grew to a very great height’ forming ‘conical battlements all around the walls’. The trees ‘contained [...] a parallelogram of great length’ filled with worshippers, ‘men and women and children, in holiday attire’ (that is, sabbath dress) flanked on each side by three rows of priests: these men are armed with swords, ‘although the rest of [their] costume and bearing was more priestly than soldierly’. The contrast between the devotional sincerity of the worshippers and the menacing presence of military priest-guardians gives an air of deception, compounded by the fact that the altar with the object of worship is so distant that the congregation, in the twilight, are unable to see it clearly. Anados, however, with fairy vision enhanced by his sacrificial decision to serve the good knight, ‘was able to perceive more clearly what took place [...] at the other end’: ‘I knew that my sight was so much more keen than that of most people, that I had

⁸¹⁰ *US3*, p. 142.

⁸¹¹ Possibly ‘pathless’ (*av-οδός*), but more probably (in my view) ‘way up’ (i.e. path to God), the literal meaning of *ανοδός*, ‘anode’ (OED) (MacDonald was, after all, a physicist).

⁸¹² See p. 146.

good reason to suppose I should see more than the rest could.⁸¹³ It is a disturbing picture. As night falls the sense of menace grows: young robed acolytes are led to the altar surrounded by priestly guardians that prevent the congregation from seeing what is going on. As the congregation sings in worship and robed figures kneel at the altar—

The knight whispered to me [Anados], “How solemn it is! Surely they wait to hear the voice of a prophet. There is something good near!”

But I, though somewhat shaken by the feeling expressed by my master, yet had an unaccountable conviction that here was something bad. So I resolved to be keenly on the watch for what should follow.⁸¹⁴

What follows is human sacrifice as the trusting acolytes are pushed through a hidden trapdoor in the idolatrous altar as the congregation sings.⁸¹⁵

The scene ends with Anados unmasking the deception in an act which results in his own death. After gaining the platform, he wrests the throne from its pedestal exposing a pit: ‘up out of it rushed a great brute, like a wolf, but twice the size’. The struggle that ensues results in the death of both, but for Anados this is the sweet death of self-sacrifice through which he is finally separated from his evil alter-ego, the shadow.⁸¹⁶

The narrative illustrates Milton’s view that God uses evil to serve the good:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Than that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness!⁸¹⁷

Reflecting this, the story ends with an equally optimistic summary of MacDonald’s doctrine of evil: ‘What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condi-

⁸¹³ *Phantastes*, pp. 304–05.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 305–06.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 307–08.

⁸¹⁶ As always in MacDonald, physical death is inconsequential. Anados enjoys a brief disembodied, blissful, and shadow-free existence before waking from his ‘dream’.

⁸¹⁷ *Paradise Lost*, XII, 469–473.

tion at the time, could be assumed by the best good.’⁸¹⁸ Conversely, the knight’s evaluation that ‘there is something good near!’ indicates that what is perceived as good is often evil.

This scene clearly presents a jaundiced view of popular religion as that presided over by a demon who is served by complicit priests intent on deception. *Phantastes* represents MacDonald’s manifesto for all his future work. From this point on, ‘we find the child’s simple faith dominating all his writings as surely as in his youth it first took control of his theology’.⁸¹⁹ This vision from fairyland may or may not represent reality, but it does force a closer inspection of it. Making the familiar strange forces a re-evaluation of reality that exposes idols—imposters—that should be expunged. To frame the issue from an alternative perspective, since culture essentially inheres in the aggregate of symbols that result from a society’s worship—what that society valorises and ‘cultivates’—fairy vision helps to counteract the blindness of convention.

(ii) Making strange the familiar

The second function of fairy vision is to *make strange the familiar*. This has less to do with exposing falsehood as revealing truth—the problem that familiarity, if not breeding contempt, has a tendency to breed indifference and complacency. Again, MacDonald’s target is primarily religious views. ‘Are you,’ he asks, ‘so familiar with the artefacts of faith that they no longer provoke a response?’ Fairy vision startles with its revealing perspectives, challenging the conclusions (social or individual) of prior experience.

MacDonald’s work, as theodicy, is primarily concerned with exploring the true nature of God. If God is not a ‘wolf’, what is God like? Repeatedly the reader is presented with a child who either claims to be, or represent, divinity, such as the Old Man of the Earth—a child who appears as the ‘oldest man of all’ in *The Golden Key*⁸²⁰—or Gibbie with a cross cut into his back, or a child whose implicit trust in God as the perfect father, like Clare Skymer, is never misplaced. Furthermore, many of MacDonald’s divine agents and theophanies are female, challenging the stereotypical view of God as male.

⁸¹⁸ *Phantastes*, p. 323.

⁸¹⁹ *GMAW*, p. 299.

⁸²⁰ *Fairy Tales*, pp. 137–38.

MacDonald, following Carlyle, saw the task of the poet as disinterring words from the grave of convention so that they could glow once more with true meaning,⁸²¹ or as Coleridge had put it, ‘genius’ rescues ‘the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very circumstances of their universal admission’.⁸²² The fairy story is one of his main vehicles for this. Not that words simply had value according their original symbolic meaning, rather it was the opposite: a quest to rediscover layered metaphor in a world increasingly focused on the conventional ‘surface’ of words. Symbol had replaced the symbolised; theologically, *les mots* had dethroned *la Parole*. In this, MacDonald anticipated the later *fin de siècle* frustration of those such as Chesterton which led to the latter’s quest to ‘find new ways to restore language as a signifying medium of the real world: namely, the fantastic’.⁸²³ Likewise in Russia in 1914, Victor Shklovsky lamented that ‘words are now dead, and language is like a graveyard’ leading to a call for the defamiliarization of both words and art.⁸²⁴ Arguing that we can become so habituated to art (and, by implication, the world around us) that we fail to see it, Shklovsky suggested a three-fold strategy of defamiliarization: to refuse to name art, thereby making it strange; to offer an unusual viewpoint; and to engage in ‘the childlike description of something familiar as if it were seen for the first time’.⁸²⁵

In the next chapter we consider how MacDonald uses all three of these techniques in his most enigmatic work, *Lilith*.

⁸²¹ *Orts*, pp. 8–9.

⁸²² Coleridge, *Collected Works*, p. 82.

⁸²³ Chesterton and Tolkien, p. 29.

⁸²⁴ From ‘The Resurrection of the Word’ (1914) in *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–34.

Chapter 7 The child against the vampire: a reading of *Lilith*

7.1 *Lilith*—making strange theology

Lilith—according to Greville MacDonald, ‘the majestic thought of his [father’s] old age’—is illustrative and summative of MacDonald’s life’s work. Published when he was seventy-one (1895), it is opaque and enigmatic, and he was nervous about publishing.⁸²⁶ His assurance that ‘there is nothing very obscure in it that is worth finding out’⁸²⁷ is controverted by the subsequent kaleidoscope of interpretations, and by the fact that the manuscript was repeatedly amended reflecting a quest to communicate *something* with precision. As autobiographical fiction, its importance is underlined by MacDonald’s comments about biography and fiction:

Deep is the relation between the life shadowed forth in a biography, and the life in a man’s brain which he shadows forth in a fiction—when that fiction is of the highest order, and written in love, is beheld even by the writer himself with reverence.⁸²⁸

Lilith, as we will see, concerns ‘the life in a man’s brain’.

Lilith is a mystical work. Just as ‘only a Kabbalist, one who ascends to a particular spiritual degree, attains what [the *Zohar*] conveys’,⁸²⁹ or only a ‘true magus’ can access the wisdom of Boehme,⁸³⁰ ‘we are here in a region [...] open only to the heart of the child’.⁸³¹ Imaginative engagement (and patience) is needed, and rewarded. *The Times*, perhaps lacking such, observed that, compared to the dream of *Phantastes*, *Lilith* was more of a nightmare:

To an intellect in which the Celtic is mixed with “the German paste” all this may seem very agreeable, and even subtly edifying, but this wilderness is tedious to the ordinary student.⁸³²

A close reading of this text is necessary since two of its central themes are evil and childhood.

⁸²⁶ ‘I often doubt if I shall write another book. There is one in the printers’ hands now, which, however, I fear you may not quite like’ (‘To Lady Mount-Temple’, *Letters GM*, p. 364).

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 366–67.

⁸²⁸ Review of ‘Essays on some of the Forms of Literature’ by T. T. Lynch, in *Orts*, p. 222.

⁸²⁹ ‘What is *The Zohar*?’, ‘Kabbalah’, <http://www.kabbalah.info/engkab/mystzohar.htm> [accessed 18 Aug 2106]. We meet *Lilith* in the *Zohar* shortly.

⁸³⁰ Page 140.

⁸³¹ Note 647. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that MacDonald is proposing an occult or ‘gnostic’ scheme accessible only to the initiated. His central point is that all are children; all have access to God.

⁸³² ‘*Lilith*’, *The Times*, 5 November 1895, p. 11.

Lilith is primarily set in a cabbalistic ‘region of the seven dimensions’ presided over by archetypal figures, mostly female.⁸³³ These are both an attraction and a threat to the protagonist—the aptly-named Mr Vane—more the latter in the case of the central and ambiguous character of the vampire, Lilith. The region of the seven dimensions appears to exist primarily in the consciousness of Vane: a realm of bewildering hallucinatory dream-sequences where shape-shifting characters and set are constantly mutating and where boundaries are blurred. This impression is confirmed by specific references to mental states; at one point, for example, Vane remarks: ‘I realised I was inside the brain of the princess.’⁸³⁴

Labyrinthine mansions, in MacDonald’s work, are metaphors for the mind.⁸³⁵ Here, Vane, having come of age, has inherited the ancestral mansion—the divine gift of human body and consciousness—which he has little motivation to explore. Like its human counterpart, the house has doorways to fairyland, a fantasy realm not so much beyond ‘reality’ as entwined with it.⁸³⁶ He is content to spend his time in the library, a repository of conventional wisdom collected by ancestors, hermetically isolated from the wider reality of which he is a part. One day, wandering into the attic, he discovers the mirror which is the gateway to a hitherto unexperienced region:

“If I know nothing of my own garret,” I thought, “what is there to secure me against my own brain? Can I tell what it is even now generating?—what thought it may present me the next moment, the next month, or a year away? What is at the heart of my brain? What is behind my THINK? Am I there at all?—Who, what am I?”⁸³⁷

⁸³³ In Kabbalah, seven—in Judaism the number of divine perfection (*Dictionary NT Theology*, II, pp. 690–692)—frequently occurs in relation to God’s creative acts. Both the *Zohar* and *Lilith* also feature three mothers whom we will meet in due course (see Arthur Edward Waite, *The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabbalah* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1902), pp. 52, 61, 62, 233). According to Waite (*ibid.*, p. xi), only two books on Kabbalah were published in the nineteenth century in English, the first, in 1865, somewhat critical; the second, S. L. MacGregor Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1887), includes translations and commentaries on three books of the *Zohar* and conceivably influenced MacDonald. Although *Lilith* does not appear in the latter, mutual themes include an emphasis on God being both male and female (*Kabbalah Unveiled*, pp. viii, 21, 22, 25), that God has been dethroned from Christianity and ‘in his stead [you] have placed [a] demon’ (p. 2), that heaven and earth are intertwined (p. 21), and that life is a dream followed by waking in eternity (pp. 31, 37).

It is more likely, however, that MacDonald was more generally influenced by the growing late Victorian interest in the mind, psychic phenomena, and theosophy.

⁸³⁴ *Lilith*, p. 191.

⁸³⁵ Edmund Cusick, ‘MacDonald and Jung’, in *The Gold Thread*, ed. by William Raeper (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp. 56–86 (p. 63).

⁸³⁶ Page 135.

⁸³⁷ *Lilith*, pp. 17–18.

This text centres on this existential question of true identity. The library at the centre of—and dominating—the house represents the mind (particularly a ‘scientific’ mind that has become anaesthetized by convention) whose ‘garrets’ (imagination) are unknown territory and whose portals (the doors and mirrors of imagination) may lead to danger or, conversely, give dangerous forces entry. In the same way that North Wind challenges the conventional understanding of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, Vane realises that the inside of his ‘house’, far from being a refuge, is dangerously sited at the edge of a greater reality of which he is ignorant.

It is a dream where Vane is aware, or suspects, that he is dreaming, a dramatization of MacDonald’s conviction that mind is the stuff of the universe and that Novalis was right when he said, ‘Our life is no dream, but it should and perhaps will become one’ (a quotation that opened his manifesto, *Phantastes*, and closes this one).⁸³⁸ It is exemplary of what W. H. Auden (and C. S. Lewis) called ‘his greatest gift’,⁸³⁹ that of ‘dream realism’, a gift used here to destabilize and defamiliarize, to make strange the familiar, and to explore a thesis set out in *The Portent* thirty years previously:

A man who dreams, and knows that he is dreaming, thinks he knows what waking is; but knows it so little, that he mistakes, one after another, many a vague and dim change in his dream for an awakening. When the true waking comes at last, he is filled and overflowed with the power of his reality.⁸⁴⁰

Vane ‘wakes’ often, only to conclude he is probably still dreaming. For example, fleeing from his dream reality to wake once more in his library, he ponders:

Had I come to myself out of a vision?—or lost myself by going back to one? Which was the real—what I now saw, or what I had just ceased to see? Could both be real, interpenetrating yet unmingling?⁸⁴¹

The narrative dramatizes the conviction that death is the final sleep from which *all* will wake into true consciousness; prior to that, life is a dream:

For we *are* dreaming, fast asleep,

⁸³⁸ Ibid., p. 351.

⁸³⁹ ‘George MacDonald’, in W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 270; *Anthology*, p. 14.

⁸⁴⁰ *The Portent*, p. 52.

⁸⁴¹ *Lilith*, p. 46.

This dream of ache and strife.⁸⁴²

All includes Lilith, the demonic and vampiric ‘queen of Hell’, Satan, and all humanity. MacDonald is dramatizing (to extremes) the ‘larger hope’ so despised by those such as Spurgeon. Thus a feature of the supernatural world beyond Vane’s house is a vast cemetery/dormitory whose sexton is Adam. Only those who submit to the sleep of death in the world of the seven dimensions may truly wake in the next—truly real—transcendent world.

Adam is assisted by Eve, their role being to ‘watch the flock of the great shepherd’ until they wake⁸⁴³ which, since Lilith also consents to sleep there, implies that she also is one of the great shepherd’s sheep. The ‘second death’, which, unlike its Johannine counterpart, always leads to life,⁸⁴⁴ is the final exit door from purgatorial reality leading to union with the Great Consciousness. In the meantime, the world of human consciousness (both pre- and post-mortem) is a purgatorial experience preparatory to that end. Adam and Eve’s jurisdiction over the fantasy world indicates that it represents the post-lapsarian nightmare realm of rebellious humanity, escape from which can only be achieved through the acceptance of ‘bread and wine’ (a meal that Adam and Eve frequently offer their guests)⁸⁴⁵ and repentance, prerequisites for submitting to the final sleep that leads to the eschaton.⁸⁴⁶

Reflecting Shklovsky’s tactic of defamiliarization, the story opens with Vane seeing something with imaginative childlike vision ‘as if for the first time’.⁸⁴⁷ It is ‘childlike’ as it concerns the realisation that he is the child of a dynasty to which he owes both existence and allegiance.

Vane reads his ‘science’ books—exploring the ‘history of the human mind in relation to supposed knowledge’⁸⁴⁸—unaware that this second-hand, historical knowledge is about to become present reality. It is the picture of a mind—MacDonald is perhaps thinking of a conserva-

⁸⁴² ‘A Dream of Waking’, *The Disciple and Other Poems* (London: Strahan & Co., 1867; Eureka, CA: Sunrise Books, 1989), p. 186. These lines are missing from the later published version in *Poetical Works*, I, pp. 420–21.

⁸⁴³ *Lilith*, p. 46.

⁸⁴⁴ Rev. 21.8.

⁸⁴⁵ *Lilith*, pp. 38, 295, 316–17.

⁸⁴⁶ Jn 6.44, 54.

⁸⁴⁷ Page 180.

⁸⁴⁸ *Lilith*, p. 2.

tive Evangelical mind—content to accept without question the received wisdom of ancestors.

However, one day a shaft of sunlight enters the library and illuminates a picture:

I knew it as the likeness of one of my ancestors, but had never even wondered why it hung there alone [...]. The direct sunlight brought out the painting wonderfully; *for the first time I seemed to see it, and for the first time it seemed to respond to my look*. With my eyes full of the light reflected from it, something [...] made me turn and cast a glance to the farther end of the room, when I saw, or seemed to see, a tall figure reaching up a hand to a bookshelf. The next instant [...] I saw no one, and concluded that my optic nerves had been momentarily affected from within.⁸⁴⁹

The library, one might say, represents the ‘left hemisphere’ of Vane’s consciousness, a repository of conventional truth, classified and filed by ancestors. It might also represent conservative views of the Bible (*τὰ βιβλία*) as a complete and final literal-factual revelation of divine truth. However, the shaft of sunlight from *outside* the library changes everything: Vane is suddenly aware of a transcendent context, the world behind or beyond the ‘text’ of his life, a world inhabited by ancestors. As he puts it: ‘The house’—his mind and body—‘had grown strange to me.’⁸⁵⁰

This epiphany is Vane’s first glimpse of a world beyond convention, the beginning of his search for his true identity. His ghostly visitor, the old butler informs him, was probably a Mr Raven, a one-time librarian that had been known to haunt the house. But when he later follows the ghostly librarian through the magic mirror into fairyland, he not only transforms into a raven, but also—we find out in due course—is really Adam, both sexton and librarian of bodies waiting for resurrection.⁸⁵¹ Books, like people, are doorways to fairyland.

Many characters appear in multiple guises. Lilith, for example, is both a beautiful woman and a leopardess, and in one scene—as if powerless to hide her true nature—her body disintegrates, but not before limbs have become snakes and ‘something [...] like a bat’ has flown from her⁸⁵²—gothic images associated with evil and vampires. Consonant with MacDonald’s view that ‘the world is [...] the human being turned inside out’,⁸⁵³ so, he suggests, ‘you can tell what

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid., p. 37.

⁸⁵² Ibid., p. 66, cf. *ibid.*, p. 190.

⁸⁵³ *Orts*, p. 9.

sort a man is by his creature that comes oftenest to the front'.⁸⁵⁴ Materiality is a manifestation of mind, and identity a schizoid hydra until such time as true God-given identity is accepted. Identity based on the false premise that one is 'inside' one's house is merely illusory.

Identity, MacDonald is arguing, is not defined by naming something or someone. The name simply represents the conventional understanding of what an entity appears to be in a certain context and can mask its true nature. Dramatizing Shklovsky's second defamiliarization tactic of refusing to name art, Vane, on being asked his name by Mr Raven, finds himself unable to recall it. He has become strange to the art that is himself:

I became at once aware that I could give him no notion of who I was. Indeed, who was I? [...] Then I understood that I did not know myself, did not know what I was, had no grounds on which to determine that I was one and not another.⁸⁵⁵

He, like Carlyle's words, finds himself 'disinterred from the grave of convention'⁸⁵⁶ and is suddenly aware of the groundlessness of his own self-understanding. His amnesiac namelessness forces him to question the nature of his reality. He cannot, for example, understand how one half of a book (human being) which he can see in his library—a *trompe l'œil* which 'some inventive workman' (God) has fixed so that half of it appears to be sticking out of a cupboard door fronted with false book spines⁸⁵⁷ (the visible world)—can appear in his world when the other half, according to Adam/Mr Raven/the librarian, appears in *his* library in 'fairyländ'. Adam's response summarises the methodology in *Lilith*, underlining its purpose to force a re-evaluation of reality through making strange the familiar:

[Y]ou are constantly experiencing things which you not only do not, but cannot understand. You think you understand them, but your understanding of them is only your being used to them, and therefore not surprised at them. You accept them, not because you understand them, but because you must accept them: they are there, and have unavoidable relations with you! The fact is, no man understands anything; when he knows he does not understand, that is his first tottering step—not toward understanding, but toward the capability of one day understanding. To such things as

⁸⁵⁴ *Lilith*, p. 37.

⁸⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸⁵⁶ Page 180.

⁸⁵⁷ *Lilith*, p. 4.

these you are not used, therefore you do not fancy you understand them. Neither I nor any man can here help you to understand; but I may, perhaps, help you a little to believe!⁸⁵⁸

This is MacDonald's response to naive cataphatic theology with its conventions: 'your understanding of them is only your being used to them'. His aim is to help the reader 'a little to believe' by distancing faith from its nineteenth century scaffolding.

The attraction to MacDonald of casting Lilith as the main antagonist becomes clear as we consider her pedigree and nineteenth century incarnation.

7.2 Lilith—anti-child and antichrist

Lilith carries a terse epigraph, a rebuke from the Kabbalah: 'Off, Lilith!', as if the Good Shepherd is calling off his most evil sheepdog. In that text, Lilith is the wife of Samaël, or Satan:

Their ultimate destruction is hinted, but meanwhile Lilith is the devastation of the world and the lash in the hands of the Holy Blessed One to strike the guilty. She is God's maidservant.⁸⁵⁹

Having made a brief appearance in Isaiah 34.14 as a hairy Babylonian demon of the desert,⁸⁶⁰ Lilith, in Jewish tradition, is infamous for her sexual and infanticidal proclivities, and in this tale her passion is drink to the blood of 'the Little Ones'. In the cabbalistic text *The Zohar* (and in *Lilith*) she is the first wife of Adam who, refusing to submit and have children by him, becomes instead the mother of hordes of demons. Her paedophilic attraction to the cherubim, with their 'little faces of tender children', turns to a jealous loathing that God uses as a tool to 'lash' the children of Eve (after all, God scourges those God loves).⁸⁶¹

From the moment she came forth, she went up and down to the cherubim who have the 'little faces of tender children' and desired to cleave unto them and be one of them and was loathe to depart from them (*Zohar* I 18b).

But the Holy One, blessed be He, removed her from them and made her go below ... He chid her and cast her into the depths of the sea, where she abode until the time that Adam and his wife sinned. Then the Holy One, blessed be He, brought her out from the depths of the sea and gave her

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 210–11.

⁸⁵⁹ *Doctrine of the Kabbalah*, p. 255.

⁸⁶⁰ W. M. S. Russell and Katherine M. Briggs, 'The Legends of Lilith and of the Wandering Jew in Nineteenth-Century Literature', *Folklore*, 92 (1981), 131–40 (p. 132).

⁸⁶¹ Page 149.

power over all those children, the ‘little faces’ of the sons of men, who are liable for punishment for the sins of their fathers (*Zohar* I 19b).⁸⁶²

Lilith’s punishment of the children of Eve is reflected in Jewish folklore, such as the tale of a couple who buy a house in Tunis, reputed to be haunted. Before its demolition, the wife insists on salvaging valuables, including a mirror. Their daughter ‘glanced at herself in the mirror all the time, and in this way she was drawn into Lilith’s web’:

For that mirror had hung in the den of demons, and a daughter of Lilith had made her home there. And when the mirror was taken from the haunted house, the demoness came with it. For every mirror is a gateway to the Other World and leads directly to Lilith’s cave.⁸⁶³

In *Lilith*, the garret mirror in Vane’s ‘mansion’—his little-used imagination—leads also to ‘Lilith’s cave’.

This essential antagonism of Lilith to children, fuelled, it appears, by her jealousy that they carry the divine image, provides MacDonald with the ideal antitype: an antichrist and ‘antichild’. Furthermore, because Eve gave birth to Cain as a result of the ‘filth of the serpent’, Lilith, like Satan in the book of Job, was given the right *as God’s maidservant* to punish Eve by stealing and killing her children.⁸⁶⁴ Either, therefore, God is vindictively punitive and holds children ‘liable for [...] the sins of their fathers’, or Lilith, like Milton’s Satan, is the unwitting servant of good. This text strongly affirms the latter, but unlike Milton’s Satan who with ‘reiterated crimes [heaps] on himself damnation’, Lilith’s crimes contribute to her salvation.

In the late nineteenth century, Lilith was a *femme fatale* with ‘a place in vampire lore either as the first and most powerful of the vampires, or at least as their queen’,⁸⁶⁵ a dreaded dominatrix embodying the male fear that Victorian females might not be as submissive as imagined, as illustrated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s seductive women, ‘part priestess, part temptress’—including *Lady Lilith*—who are more a picture of his state of mind than real women.⁸⁶⁶ Women such as Lilith and Salome became symbols of female threat in an age when Romanticism was

⁸⁶² Barbara Black Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith* (Berwick, ME: Nicolas-Hays Inc., 1986), pp. 78, 81.

⁸⁶³ Howard Schwartz, *Lilith’s Cave* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 120–21.

⁸⁶⁴ *Zohar* I, 76b and II, 96 a–b (*The Book of Lilith*, p. 81).

⁸⁶⁵ Alan Humm, ‘Lilith’, <http://jewishchristianlit.com/Topics/Lilith/lilith.html> [accessed 30 Mar 2015].

⁸⁶⁶ Andrew Wilton, ‘Symbolism in Britain’, in *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts*, ed. by Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), pp. 18–19.

becoming more symbolic; psychological overtones and dream-like, evocative prose reflected a 'surrealist perception of half-articulated or unexpressed mental phenomena',⁸⁶⁷ a phrase that sums up *Lilith*.⁸⁶⁸

7.3 The landscape and action in *Lilith*

The mirage-like 'realm of seven dimensions' in *Lilith* conceals a simple yet highly ambiguous landscape. The daylight world of forests, rocky hills, and deserts populated by exotic or benign floræ and faunæ becomes a world of nightmare after sundown. As Vane journeys by night, monsters erupt from the ground beneath his feet, skeletons perform a macabre dance in a woodland cathedral like that in *Phantastes*, and while he sleeps Lilith drinks his blood. She is the source of every nightmare scene and is frequently glimpsed on the edges of vision. She 'possesses' a large part of his psyche.

Reflecting MacDonald's preoccupation with the polarities of good and evil, day and night,⁸⁶⁹ the fantasy world is the ambiguous meeting point of these two opposites whose boundary is blurred. An enigmatic moon presides over the night of Vane's nightmares: if not the direct radiance of God's light then at least indicative of indirect divine protection. The moon slays the monsters of the deep, and shines when most needed. But equally, this feminine light is associated with vampires, and Vane frequently encounters Lilith in cold moonlight. Is the moon benign or demonic? Similarly, Lilith, the queen of Hell who has enslaved 'the great Shadow',⁸⁷⁰ is also the ruler of a city that, unlike the phantom night-visions that dissolve with the dawn, also exists in the realm of daylight. It is this intersection of conflict that interests MacDonald—the liminal realm where humans have to choose between good and evil; the 'epistemic distance' from the divine sun where wrong choice leads to outer darkness.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 13–14.

⁸⁶⁸ For a review of Lilith in nineteenth century vampire narratives, see David Melville Wingrove, 'La Belle Dame: *Lilith* and the Romantic Vampire Tradition', in *Rethinking GM*.

⁸⁶⁹ Such as in the disturbing tale *The History of Photogen and Nycteris: A Day and Night Märchen* where a witch, Watho (perhaps derived from 'waith', a term for illegal hunting), steals children in order to experiment on them. Stolen at birth, Photogen ('light's offering') is raised in 'the full splendour of the sun' in whose light the witch 'stript him and laid him in it, that he might ripen as a peach', whereas the girl, Nycteris ('night creature' or 'night unrest'), a 'little bat', is forbidden access to the outside world and kept in a room lit by the 'feeble rays of a lamp in an alabaster globe' (*Fairy Tales*, pp. 304–41 and notes p. 354).

⁸⁷⁰ *Lilith*, p. 204.

⁸⁷¹ Page 142.

Two settlements are located in this landscape placing ‘evil’ opposite ‘childlikeness’ but they also are fraught with ambiguity and paradox. The city represents an overt criticism of nineteenth century materialism, a place whose inhabitants have allowed walls to separate them from divine reality, and whose primary aim in life is to exploit others. ‘They were rich, and had everything made for them in other towns,’ and considered it ‘a disgrace to work’. The princess (Lilith) has taught them to mine jewels from the foundations of their houses; these they use to buy what they need from others who labour. They are an indolent and dull people, content to watch their city slowly crumble into ruin, inconsiderate of the plight of the poor.⁸⁷²

A counterfeit New Jerusalem, the city is centred on a temple where the princess resides. Unlike the former city of light that has no need of temple, sun or moon,⁸⁷³ it has a heart of darkness: a black chamber at the heart of Lilith’s temple. When Vane enters this, he experiences a procession of grotesque images, all of which he has encountered in the world beyond the city walls, bringing the realisation that he is ‘in the brain’ of the princess.⁸⁷⁴ Lilith, radiating evil into this ‘mental’ universe (or rather, absorbing light), is the antithesis of the God that emanates goodness. Furthermore, for Lilith to survive she must drink the blood of the city’s new-born. Hers is a counterfeit and deceptive Eucharist. Like Adam and Eve, Lilith, in the silver robes of a vampire,⁸⁷⁵ also offers Vane bread and wine, seductively saying, ‘Here we do not kill to eat [...] but I think you will like what I can give you’,⁸⁷⁶ however her ‘wine’ is the diluted blood of children. Unlike the true Eucharist that is preparation for the submissive sleep in Adam’s cemetery, her false Eucharist aims to prolong a rebellious life: ‘Old age is to you a horror,’ she remarks, ‘to me it is a dear desire: the older we grow, the nearer we are to our perfection. Your perfection is a poor thing, comes soon, and lasts but a little while; ours is a ceaseless ripening.’⁸⁷⁷ The perfection that Lilith seeks, in other words, is the opposite of childhood and a chimera.

⁸⁷² *Lilith*, p. 165.

⁸⁷³ Rev. 21.22–23.

⁸⁷⁴ *Lilith*, p. 191.

⁸⁷⁵ Silver apparel, evocative of moonlight, was standard gothic vampire dress. Tieck’s Brunhilda, for example, only wears silver and ‘pearls alone lent their pale lustre to adorn her bosom’ (‘La Belle Dame’, p. 185).

⁸⁷⁶ *Lilith*, pp. 178–79.

⁸⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179

The ‘city’ of human rebellion, MacDonald is proposing, being founded on evil, is inherently and doubly self-destructing. Since Lilith can only survive by killing new-born infants, the population is destined to decline. In addition—like the city whose ruin is described in Babylonian terms at the end of *The Princess and Curdie*—greedy mining for gems in the foundations will necessarily lead to collapse. In that narrative:

One day at noon, when life was at its highest, the whole city fell with a roaring crash. The cries of men and the shrieks of women went up with its dust, and then there was a great silence.⁸⁷⁸

The plot centres on the need to spirit away new-born babies from the city before they become vampire prey. These are carried to a forest where they form a tribe of ‘Little Ones’ whose existing inhabitants care for the new arrivals, innocent of knowledge of either their own origins or those of their charges.

The Little Ones are ‘innocent’ and naive in the extreme. Like Peter Pan, they are eternally prepubescent and (apparently) prelapsarian. They are led by a girl, Lona—who ‘was become almost a woman, but not one beauty of childhood had she outgrown’—who reminds Vane of his beautiful, half-remembered mother and with whom he becomes disturbingly infatuated: ‘My every imagination flew to her; she was my heart’s wife!’⁸⁷⁹ She, and other female characters, cry out for Jungian or Freudian interpretations;⁸⁸⁰ however, the issue in focus here is the children’s naivety. Like Gibbie, they are not human: Vane has fallen in love with an illusion, possibly the product of his own fantasy, which is nevertheless considered real by both him and his fantasy-world guide, Adam.

Extreme versions of the children in Murdoch Malison’s class, the innocence of these Little Ones has no real-world counterpart. They chatter happily, never argue, and revere Lona as their mother. Unlike Peter Pan, they have the dangerous potential to mutate into dull ‘giants’ like their parents (and a few do). What is lacking is any positive view of adulthood. In Tolkien’s words:

⁸⁷⁸ *The Princess and Curdie*, p. 255, cf. Rev. 14.8, 16.9, 18.2.

⁸⁷⁹ *Lilith*, p. 240. One imagines this was one of the reasons why Louisa MacDonald ‘was troubled by the book’s strange imagery’ (*GMAW*, p. 548).

⁸⁸⁰ See, for example, ‘MacDonald and Jung’; John S. Dunne, ‘The Friends of God “Guided and Guarded” J. R. R. Tolkien’, *Journal of Law and Religion*, 11 (1994), 323–42 (p. 338).

If we use *child* in the good sense (it has also legitimately a bad one) we must not allow that to push us into sentimentality of only using *adult* or *grown-up* in a bad sense (it has also a legitimately good one). The process of growing older is not necessarily allied to growing wicked, although the two do often happen together. Children are meant to grow up, and not to become Peter Pans. Not to lose innocence and wonder, but to proceed on the appointed journey.⁸⁸¹

These children, however, are not allowed to grow up and MacDonald *has* been ‘pushed into sentimentality’. They embody innocence until they make the choice to eat the bitter apples that grow in this Eden, at which point they mutate into sinful and dull ‘adults’. The theological issue, however, is not so much natal innocence as that these Little Ones are invited by Adam to sleep in his cemetery, apparently bypassing the temporal ‘system of soul-making’ where genuine issues relating to good and evil must be faced. Their origin is not the world of three dimensions; they have not tasted Dostoevsky’s apple.⁸⁸² This reflects the duality that Rousseau and Blake set up between innocence and experience, nature and culture,⁸⁸³ a duality that fails to account for the fact that true humanity involves distinguishing good from evil and making moral choices—possibly the primary message of Genesis 1–3. In Alison Milbank’s words, the Romanicism of those such as MacDonald’s has ‘served to strand children across a hermeneutic chasm’.⁸⁸⁴ The Little Ones appear to be stranded on the wrong side.

Vane falls in love with one of these phantoms (who, incidentally, is the daughter of Lilith—she did have one child by Adam—who has inherited none of the traits of her vampire mother except extraordinary beauty; despite being the offspring of the ‘queen of Hell’, the daughter is without sin). He is, therefore, far from the ideal human. His Ruskinian obsession with this prepubescent child-woman is disturbing. Vane’s weakness is his attraction to all the beautiful women he meets which often spills over into unwise action, such as his abortive attempt to storm the city with an army of children and capture Lilith—despite having been specifically warned by Adam against this. Nevertheless, God makes sure ‘all things work for good’ (since this is the beginning of Lilith’s reformation). When Vane asks what the consequences

⁸⁸¹ ‘Tree and Leaf’, p. 47 (see also *Chesterton and Tolkien*, p. 147).

⁸⁸² Note 416.

⁸⁸³ *Chesterton and Tolkien*, p. 144.

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

will be of him making a wrong choice, Adam's answer further clarifies MacDonald's philosophy of evil:

"Then some evil that is good for you will follow."

"And if I remember [to heed your advice]?"

"Some evil that is not good for you, will not follow."⁸⁸⁵

In other words, when it comes to evil it is always a win-win situation.

Wrong choice is evident when Vane initially encounters Lilith. He finds her emaciated body, naked and cold, lying inert in a forest. Unaware that she is the arch-enemy of the Little Ones, and convincing himself that his main motive is to prevent 'irreverent eyes [looking] on it',⁸⁸⁶ he decides to give the body a decent burial, but, unsure whether she is really dead, he reports: 'I [...] got as close to her as I could, and took her in my arms. I had not much heat left in me, but what I had I would share with her!'⁸⁸⁷ The erotic overtones are evident. He remains with her for many days unaware that as he cradles her each night she is drinking his blood, regaining life while feigning death. Vane is, therefore, responsible for reviving the worst danger possible for the Little Ones. He, as a human being from the world of three dimensions, is needed to provide the blood which the parasite of evil needs for life; in other words, it is the evil in him (which he convinces himself is good) that nourishes this existential evil. Each descendent of Adam and Eve, MacDonald is saying, is responsible for the threat to childhood. The irony is that it is a descendant of Lilith (Lona) who protects the children.

7.4 The tactic of defamiliarization

Through these destabilizing and defamiliarizing tactics, MacDonald is demanding the reader consider the nature of evil. Evil may appear good, as in the case of seductive Lilith, but equally, good may appear evil, as in the character of Mara. Regarding the former, having insisted that 'beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed',⁸⁸⁸ he muses: 'Could such beauty as I saw, and such wickedness as I suspected, exist in the same person?'⁸⁸⁹ The latter, who seems

⁸⁸⁵ *Lilith*, p. 129.

⁸⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁸⁸⁸ *Orts*, p. 315.

⁸⁸⁹ *Lilith*, p. 177.

evil at first sight, is the guardian of the Little Ones, and also she who—in the form of a pure white leopardess—steals newborns from the city and deposits them in the forest for the Little Ones to find. Of course, mothers consider her evil, unaware that she is protecting their offspring from the vampire princess who, in a further destabilizing tactic, also appears as a white leopardess but with black spots, prowling the city searching for new-born blood. Furthermore, although her name is biblical—a reference to Naomi’s self-designation as Mara, ‘bitterness’⁸⁹⁰—in Buddhist theology, Mara is the equivalent of Satan who has three daughters, also known as Maras, whose job it is to seduce and destroy humans. It is possible that MacDonald was aware of this. Like her Buddhist counterparts, Mara in this tale is a shape-shifter (woman and leopardess), and may be a product of his reading of an 1871 text on Buddhism which describes the Maras as demons who can ‘assume the most hideous forms’.⁸⁹¹ In a final twist, we learn that Mara is the daughter of Eve.

To summarise this confusing scenario: the Little Ones are in mortal danger from Lilith, a fallen being created by God to be the original mother of the race but who is now the ‘anti-mother’, and are protected by two step-sisters, one the daughter of Eve, and one the daughter of Lilith herself,⁸⁹² through whom—it has been prophesied—Lilith’s downfall will come. This is the final piece of the jigsaw. Lilith is aware that ‘[t]here is an old prophecy that a child will be the death of her’,⁸⁹³ and therefore lives in fear of its fulfilment, however, in MacDonald’s language, death equates to salvation and access to the eschaton: Lilith, the personification of evil, will also be saved. Nevertheless, it is essentially the story of the child against the vampire.

7.5 The battle in (and for) the mind

That all is foreseen, if not pre-scripted, by God is dramatized in a scene where Lilith, in the guise of a Persian cat (witchcraft), has managed to follow Adam and Vane back to the latter’s

⁸⁹⁰ Ruth 1.20.

⁸⁹¹ Henry Alabaster, *The Wheel of Law: Buddhism* (London: Trübner & Co., 1871), p. 151. Further parallels may indicate familiarity. The abortive attempt of the army of children to storm the city, some mounted on miniature elephants, appears a parody of the Buddhist narrative of the Mara attacking the Buddha. The Mara ‘assuming an immense size, and with a thousand arms brandishing all kinds of martial weapons, riding on his elephant Girimaga, a thousand miles in height, led the way. The van stretched two hundred and fifty miles before him [...] “Advance my soldiers,” he shouted, “seize and bind the Prince”’ (ibid., p. 150).

⁸⁹² Adam reveals he had one child, Lona, by Lilith (p. 204).

⁸⁹³ *Lilith*, pp. 151, 233; cf. Gen. 3.15.

library. In the library—Vane’s mind—there is a battle between good and evil; Adam versus his unsubmitive ex-wife, the mother of evil. The all-powerful Adam, who seems to equate more to Paul’s new Adam than his old namesake,⁸⁹⁴ casts spells that prevent the cat’s escape before casually taking the ancient volume, hitherto an immovable feature of Vane’s faux bookcase:

He opened the vellum cover, and turned a leaf or two. The parchment was discoloured with age, and one leaf showed a dark stain over two-thirds of it.⁸⁹⁵ He slowly turned this also, and seemed looking for a certain passage in what appeared a continuous poem. Somewhere about the middle of the book he began to read.⁸⁹⁶

The ‘continuous poem’—God’s creative thoughts—reveals foreknowledge of Lilith’s existence and actions. A reader might be tempted to skip the stanzas, however they reveal much about Lilith. First, she is indeed given life and substance by male fantasy. Articulating Lilith’s thoughts, the poem begins:

But if I found a man that could believe
In what he saw not, felt not, and yet knew,
From him I should take substance, and receive
Firmness and form relate to touch and view;
Then should I clothe me in the likeness true
Of that idea where his soul did cleave!⁸⁹⁷

Just as God’s thoughts become human reality, so human ideas create ‘substance’. Confirming Calvin’s worst fears,⁸⁹⁸ male imagination gives birth to evil. Imaginative Romantic liberalism is not a panacea against the perceived evils of dogmatic conservatism. It gives birth to the distorted feminine and demonic ‘idea where his soul did cleave’ and is given ‘firmness and form’ through ‘Vane’s’ (‘self-centred’) male fantasies. This is not God’s idea of who Lilith should be, but neither is it Vane’s: she, like Vane, has lost her true identity having sold her soul

⁸⁹⁴ Vane observes: ‘Then at last I understood that Mr. Raven was indeed Adam, the old and the new man; and that his wife, ministering in the house of the dead, was Eve, the mother of us all, the lady of the New Jerusalem’ (ibid., p. 206).

⁸⁹⁵ In MacDonald’s KJV, the only reference to two thirds or ‘two parts [of three]’ occurs when God, after ‘smiting the shepherd’, kills two-thirds of the ‘little ones’ (Zech. 13.7–9). The remaining third will eventually say: ‘The LORD is my God’, but only after trial by fire. Perhaps this ‘dark stain’ is a troubling reminder that many babies become ‘vampire prey’. How does this fit in with the ‘larger hope’? Adam’s page-turn illustrates MacDonald’s view that apparently evil biblical statements should not be accepted at face value, but should be set to one side until qualified by a deeper truth (note 970).

⁸⁹⁶ *Lilith*, p. 200.

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 201.

⁸⁹⁸ *Institutes*, I. 4. 1; 13. 1; 15. 6.

to the great Shadow, Satan; Vane has given birth to something beyond his control. Both are slaves to the evil will of the Shadow.

Although in some sense the product of a human mind, she should not, however, be considered ‘immaterial’: in MacDonald’s idealism, such reality equates to the stuff of everyday life. She has erotic power and is the personification of the worst of male Victorian fears.⁸⁹⁹

In me was every woman. I had power
Over the soul of every living man

A power indiscernible by the five senses, but able to

[...] trammel brain and spine
With rooted bonds which Death could not untwine—
Or life, though hope were evermore deferred.⁹⁰⁰

The phrase ‘that Death could not untwine—Or life’ reiterates the conviction that freedom from evil—‘untwining’ oneself from evil—is not the *result* of death (that is, the ‘second death’ that leads to eternal life) but a *prerequisite* of it: one cannot lie down in Adam’s cemetery and await the great awakening without first having renounced evil. Neither is it a natural consequence of life, however long such ‘hope is deferred’.⁹⁰¹ Rather, freedom from evil involves a renunciation of it, either in this world or the purgatorial afterlife.

The poem continues with Lilith rejoicing in her power to seduce the male through whom she is ‘clothed human’, a seduction focused on antagonism to the divine presence. Claiming her right to human worship, to be the ‘candle’ at the centre of human consciousness,⁹⁰² she declares:

Ah, who was ever conquering Love but I!
Who else did ever throne in heart of man!⁹⁰³

Thus throned, and deluded that she has conquered Love, she is an antichrist. Furthermore, in her body she has a wounded side—a dark spot of evil that she tries to hide—and a wounded

⁸⁹⁹ Although revealing Victorian male fears of the feminine, I believe one should not read too much into this. Just as ‘man’—male and female—is being ‘thought by God’ in MacDonald’s scheme, so Lilith, being thought by ‘man’ has more to do with the polarities of good and evil than masculine and feminine.

⁹⁰⁰ *Lilith*, p. 201.

⁹⁰¹ ‘Deferred hope’ appears a reference to Proverbs 13.12—refusing the ‘hope’ of final death which ‘when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life’ (KJV).

⁹⁰² *Orts*, p. 25.

⁹⁰³ *Lilith*, p. 202.

hand clenched in defiant possession, holding back the water of grace that will heal the land, counterfeit stigmata to match her counterfeit Eucharist.

She is, according to Adam, essentially parasitic: ‘Vilest of God’s creatures, she lives by the blood and lives and souls of men. She consumes and slays, but is powerless to destroy as to create.’⁹⁰⁴ She may ‘slay’ those who have existence in this life or the next, but eventually these lie down in Adam’s cemetery to wake in a realm over which Lilith has no jurisdiction (the implication being that her evil designs work for the reformation of others). She is, then, ultimately impotent, even when it comes to the making or destroying of her own life. In her quest for autonomy she is described as having enslaved the ‘great Shadow’, but in this she is deceived. Adam describes how, after rejecting his authority,

she [...] fled to the army of the aliens, and soon had so ensnared the heart of the great Shadow, that he became her slave, wrought her will, and made her queen of Hell.⁹⁰⁵

There is, however, paradox here for only one greater than her can bestow queenhood. It is but an illusion: in reality she is ‘slave of sin’.⁹⁰⁶

So what is MacDonald’s understanding of the great Shadow?

7.6 Satan—the great Shadow

Shadows are code for evil. Mara, for example, the guardian of the Little Ones, appears as a pure white leopardess. In contrast, Lilith, their enemy, hunts as a white leopardess covered with black spots. As she metamorphoses into a woman, these coalesce into one permanent shadow on her side, indicative of the evil eating at her heart. One night, however, Vane observes a dark shadow haunting the streets, apparently an informant bringing news of new birth back to the princess. One reading is that this is the ‘soul’ of the princess—her essential shadow-nature—locating newborns but incapable of seizing them unless returning incarnate as the spotted leopardess. But another, more plausible, reading is that this is the great Shadow, the devil ‘walking

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 205.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 204.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 206.

about seeking whom he may devour'.⁹⁰⁷ It may be a case of mistaken identity, but Vane does use the pronoun 'he' in his account:

he cast no shadow, and was himself but a flat superficial shadow, of two dimensions. He was, nevertheless, an opaque shadow, for he not merely darkened any object on the other side of him, but rendered it, in fact, invisible. In the shadow he was blacker than the shadow; in the moonlight he looked like one who had drawn his shadow up about him, for not a suspicion of it moved beside or under him [...] the shadow seemed once to look at me, for I lost his profile, and saw for a second only a sharp upright line.⁹⁰⁸

Lilith, it seems, is powerless unless 'possessed' by the Shadow; she has to wait for its return before she can emerge in the form of a leopardess or a woman. Just as humans have no independent existence and are entirely dependent on God,⁹⁰⁹ Lilith is entirely dependent on Satan. Deluding herself that she has enslaved the will of the great Shadow (as Adam suggests)⁹¹⁰ it is she who is the slave.

Reflecting Cosmo's reflections on the nature of evil in *What's Mine's Mine*,⁹¹¹ the essence of evil is, by this account, perfect shadow, a 'black body' (as in physics) that absorbs all divine light but which itself has no substance. MacDonald offers no explanation for its origin apart from noting that the darkness in Lilith is something that 'God could not have created'.⁹¹² If God is light, it is the ultimate antithesis—a will set perfectly against God's. In Lilith's case, her insubmission to Adam is opposition to God: 'For her first thought was *power*;' says Adam, 'she counted it slavery to be one with me, and bear children for Him who gave her being.'⁹¹³

MacDonald, however, does not believe in 'pure' evil, but that the universe is essentially good, that, in words reminiscent of Maurice, 'love, not hate, is deepest in what Love "loved into being"',⁹¹⁴ a sentiment reflected in one of Vane's epiphanies: 'evil was only through good! self-

⁹⁰⁷ 1 Pet. 5.8.

⁹⁰⁸ *Lilith*, p. 163.

⁹⁰⁹ Note 540.

⁹¹⁰ *Lilith*, p. 204.

⁹¹¹ Page 146.

⁹¹² *Lilith*, p. 286.

⁹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

ishness but a parasite on the tree of life!'.⁹¹⁵ Lilith, therefore, is also not pure evil, just a distorted good creature whose will, as queen of Hell, is the ultimate Shadow.

Lilith's powerlessness apart from the Shadow accounts for the ease of her capture by the Little Ones, which, for an all-powerful queen of Hell, appears absurd. After a chaotic assault on Lilith's temple, during which Lilith kills her daughter (Vane's lover), a procession of Little Ones emerges from the temple with Lilith bound hand and foot, tied to an elephant. It is not that they have become powerful, but that she has become powerless—the Shadow has left her, knowing that her time has come. The account of its flight as a dark two-dimensional being that tries, and fails, to 'possess' the children in its path implies that there *is* a pure will that is evil, distinguishable from the will of any host,⁹¹⁶ a paradox explored below.

The procession, after some days, arrives at Mara's House of Bitterness where the daughter of Eve sets out to reform her step-sister. The account of her final submission to Adam is revealing. 'Bitterness', and ministry from Mara who the children know as 'the cat-woman', is needed to precipitate reform. As Vane explains to the accompanying children, Lilith needs the 'ministry of pain':⁹¹⁷ 'A friend is one who gives us what we need, and the princess is sorely in need of a terrible scratching.'⁹¹⁸ The process involves Lilith experiencing the spectrum of God's being, from burning core of love to outer darkness, where she stares into, and then enters, the abyss of non-being. It is based on the conviction that, like Vane in search of *his* true identity, Lilith is not her 'true self'—God's idea of her. It is MacDonald's dramatization of his conviction that none, even 'Satan', can resist God's inexorable love.

As a 'silver worm [...] white-hot, vivid as incandescent silver, the live heart of essential fire' crawls across her prostrate body 'until it reached her bosom, where it disappeared among the folds' and enters her 'secret chamber',⁹¹⁹ Mara urges her to embrace her true identity: 'Alas,

⁹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

⁹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 259–62.

⁹¹⁷ Section 5.5 (c).

⁹¹⁸ *Lilith*, p. 270.

⁹¹⁹ Phallic and erotic overtones are unavoidable, but MacDonald insists the 'worm' or 'serpent' 'was piercing through the joints and marrow to the thoughts and intents of the heart' (ibid., p. 279; Heb. 4.12). There are, nevertheless, parallels to the standard late nineteenth century methods of ritually dispatching a vampire, normally (also) involving a spear through the heart. As Wingrove observes (to whom I am indebted for his insight into vampires): 'By the time the Victorian age was at its height, only a fully-fledged ritual slaying would do to expunge the female vampire from the text' ('La Belle Dame', p. 192). Lilith gets off lightly in comparison.

you are another now, not yourself! Will you not be your real self?’ As the silver fire burns inside Lilith, Mara explains:

“The central fire of the universe is radiating into her the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of what she is. She sees at last the good she is not, the evil she is. She knows that *she is herself the fire in which she is burning*, but she does not know that the Light of Life is the heart of that fire. Her torment is that she is what she is.”⁹²⁰

As the knowledge of good and evil dawns, Lilith burns in the hell of her own making, unaware, or refusing to admit, that ‘the Light of Life is the heart of that fire’. She refuses to repent, blaming God for making her: ‘He alone is to blame for what I am! [...] He meant me such that I might know it and be miserable!’⁹²¹

She is then forced to stare into the void of non-being. Vane is empathetically aware of ‘an invisible darkness’:

A horrible Nothingness, a Negation positive infolded her; the border of its being that was yet no being, touched me, and for one ghastly instant I seemed alone with Death Absolute! It was not the absence of everything I felt, but the presence of Nothing. The princess dashed herself from the settle to the floor with an exceeding great and bitter cry. It was the recoil of Being from Annihilation.⁹²²

Even this, however, results in defiance. Only when a ‘heavenly mirror’ shows her two images—‘the one what God had intended her to be, the other what she had made herself’⁹²³—does she finally, but reluctantly, submit (‘her submission was not feigned, neither was it real’).⁹²⁴ At this point, Mara draws her patient’s attention to her clenched fist, the fingers enclosed on something she refuses to release. Lilith replies defiantly: ‘I will yet be mistress of myself! I am still what I have always known myself—queen of Hell, and mistress of the worlds!’, resulting in her being pushed over the threshold into ‘non-being’. Like ‘the lost soul’, in the ‘outer

⁹²⁰ *Lilith*, p. 280.

⁹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁹²² *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁹²³ *Ibid.*

⁹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

darkness' she is aware that the 'source of life had withdrawn itself; all that was left her of conscious being was the dregs of her dead and corrupted life'.⁹²⁵

Lilith finally submits. "I yield," said the princess. "I cannot hold out. I am defeated.—Not the less, I cannot open my hand"⁹²⁶—a symbol of her yet being a slave to something beyond herself, which Mara puts thus:

"A slave thou art *that shall one day be a child!*" answered Mara.—"Verily, thou shalt die, but not as thou thinkest. Thou shalt die out of death into life. Now is the Life for, that never was against thee!"⁹²⁷

Despite her repentance, Lilith is still 'enslaved by sin'.⁹²⁸ Reflecting MacDonald's view of atonement as involving reconciliation with, and forgiveness from, those sinned against, as well as reparations for wrongs committed, the final step involves a confrontation with Adam.

The journey to Adam's cemetery, though, is significant, in that on the way the entourage has to traverse the 'bad burrow' where earlier monsters of nightmare had erupted from the ground beneath Vane's feet. Despite Lilith's repentant state (she is now weeping copiously) the monsters once more heave from the ground with Lilith as their main target. The children are oblivious to their presence. There are paradoxes in this image. First, that children are immune to evil. Second, that despite implying that the evil in the land emanates from Lilith's mind, these monsters appear to have their genesis elsewhere: Lilith has renounced evil, so where do they come from? The repentance of the queen of Hell appears not to imply that existential evil has ceased, but that the great Shadow still holds sway in other 'hosts'—Vane, perhaps, being among them. Evil, in MacDonald's scheme, will only be defeated when all created beings—including the great Shadow itself—have chosen to turn towards the light (although this conclusion will be examined more closely below).

Eve's response to Mara's optimism when they finally arrive at the house of death reinforces this:

"Your children are no longer in her danger," said Mara; "she has turned from evil."

⁹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 285–86.

⁹²⁶ Ibid., p. 287.

⁹²⁷ Ibid. (emphasis mine).

⁹²⁸ Note 870.

“Trust her not hastily, Mara,” answered her mother; “she has deceived a multitude!”⁹²⁹

But there is paradox here too, for despite the great Shadow being a two-dimensional entity that is essential negation (clearly an image of Satan since Eve notes in passing, ‘Even now is his head under my heel!’)⁹³⁰ here Eve remarks: ‘When the Shadow comes here, it will be to lie down and sleep also.—His hour will come, and he knows it will.’⁹³¹

Lilith finally sleeps in Adam’s cemetery, but the account raises further questions. First, she is far from submissive. On arrival, Adam offers to carry her into the house, but ‘she repulsed him, [...] unsubmitive’.⁹³² Eve, however, expresses universalist optimism: ‘Sooner or later all will be little ones, for all must sleep in my house! It is well with those that go to sleep young and willing!—Lilith [...] is neither young nor quite willing, but it is well indeed that she is come.’⁹³³ Second, although the children gladly receive bread and wine from Eve before they sleep, Lilith refuses:

“Thy beauty slays me! It is death I would have, not food!” said Lilith, and turned from her.

“This food will help thee to die,” answered Eve.

But Lilith would not taste of it.

“If thou wilt nor [*sic*] eat nor drink, Lilith,” said Adam, “come and see the place where thou shalt lie in peace.”⁹³⁴

Lilith would still rather be the priestess of a counterfeit Eucharist than share in the real one. The paradox is that in refusing bread and wine she ‘has no life in her’,⁹³⁵ and yet she longs for death. Third, in these scenes Lilith appears to have her own substantial being, negating the pains MacDonald has gone to portray her as fundamentally parasitic. Who is ‘hosting’ her now? It appears to be God.

Her final capitulation to sleep is ambiguous to the end in that she never unclenches her hand. Instead, on the basis that it has been closed for a thousand years and ‘the fingers have

⁹²⁹ *Lilith*, p. 296.

⁹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁹³² *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

⁹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 297–98.

⁹³⁵ Jn 6.53.

grown together and into the palm',⁹³⁶ she demands that Adam cut it off. Despite volunteering her hand for amputation, her ultimate submission to the divine will is itself 'parasitic' on the will of another.

The narrative ends with Vane being instructed to travel to a desert location and bury the hand. This time he follows instructions. As a result, water flows in the desert and the land transforms into an Edenic paradise. On returning from his commission, Vane receives bread and wine from Adam and Eve and is finally laid to rest at Lona's side. He sleeps, dreaming that he is once more abroad in the land, a 'dream' which ends with him waking once more in his own house. After four nights, he wakes once more in the house of death to find Lona standing and smiling by his side. He is now, according to Adam, 'clothed-upon with Death, which is the radiant garment of Life'.⁹³⁷

Thus clothed and (apparently) post-mortem, he and Lona experience 'a glorious resurrection-morning. The night had been spent in preparing it!', described in MacDonald's most purple prose. An entourage of Little Ones and beasts led by Vane and Lona set out for a celestial city whose upper reaches are hidden in clouds. They traverse once more the now-fertile land flowing with the water of grace, but this Eden is not without its snakes: as they pass the 'bad burrow', now a crystal lake, Vane reports:

I gazed into its pellucid depths. A whirlpool had swept out the soil in which the abortions burrowed, and at the bottom lay visible the whole horrid brood: a dim greenish light pervaded the crystalline water, and revealed every hideous form beneath it.⁹³⁸

Are these dead forms, or might they also be resurrected if another Lilith was to arise, seduce another Vane, and make the land a desert?

On arrival at the 'New Jerusalem' the group climbs towards heaven. As the children hurry forward to meet Christ,⁹³⁹ at the last moment an unseen hand pushes Vane through 'a little door with a golden lock':

⁹³⁶ *Lilith*, p. 302.

⁹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 338–39.

⁹³⁹ One of the children reports (in their terrible baby language) that the 'beautifullest man' said to her 'Ou's all mine's, 'ickle ones: come along!' (*ibid.*, p. 344, cf. Matt. 19.14).

The door opened; the hand let mine go, and pushed me gently through. I turned quickly, and saw the board of a large book in the act of closing behind me. I stood alone in my library.⁹⁴⁰

Vane has just emerged from a 'book', that magic gateway to the transcendent world of imagination which is not imaginary. *We* emerge from the book pondering, with Vane, whether experienced reality is merely the product of mind—'My brain was its mother, and the fever in my blood its father.' However, MacDonald locates the human mind in the divine, and God, like a violinist, guides the bow across the strings of experience.⁹⁴¹ Vane concludes: 'When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it',⁹⁴² and thus he lives in hope.

Writing in 1857 to his father, MacDonald expresses this hope in a prayer:

May the one Father make us all clean at last by his beautiful forgiving tenderness & his well-ordered sufferings, & when the right time comes, wake us out of this sleep into the new world, which is the old one, when we shall say as one that wakes from a dream—Is it then over, & I live?⁹⁴³

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 348.

⁹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 350.

⁹⁴² Ibid.

⁹⁴³ *Letters GM*, p. 124; cf. 'To Henry Sutton' (ibid., p. 163): 'when we lie down at last God will give a glorious waking to all our dreams; all that was lovely in them we shall find true'.

Chapter 8 *Lilith*—a summary of George MacDonald's theology

8.1 A realist fantasy

Ronald MacDonald remarked that his father's—

iridescent imagination gave its colour to the religion that was his. [...] his imaginative faculty was a prism, falling through which the Great White Light was disparded into seventy times seven hues of human delight.⁹⁴⁴

Lilith is certainly 'colourful'. This end-of-canon narrative refracts many core themes into more visible elements. This chapter attempts to identify these, clarifying specific theological ideas already discussed by considering *Lilith*'s methodology and content. Some immediate critical comments are offered, but the primary aim is to present a concise summary of MacDonald's 'theology of childhood'.

MacDonald's reluctance to publish *Lilith* was, I believe, twofold: first, the first-person narrative implies an autobiographic dimension, or at minimum an account of scenes familiar to an author. Since these describe mental states, MacDonald is necessarily making himself vulnerable to charges of, for example, sexual perversion and erotic fantasies. He is saying, in effect, that these are normal (or at least common) male fantasies, a revelation that may not have sat too comfortably with his readership. The genre of 'Christian gothic erotic fantasy', as now, no doubt raised a few eyebrows.

But the point is that these *are* normal.⁹⁴⁵ Although *Lilith* appears 'fantastic'—the 'little world of his own' that the author has created seems, at first glance, to bear little relation to lived experience—in many respects this is 'realist fantasy': this *is* how MacDonald views his world. 'The world is [...] the human being turned inside out',⁹⁴⁶ a place where evil affects (or infects) vision, and where lived reality emanates from the divine mind. That there are few 'material' touchstones should not distract from the concrete nature of the proposals being made regarding

⁹⁴⁴ 'George MacDonald', in *From a Northern Window*, ed. by F. Watson (London: James Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1911), pp. 55–113 (pp. 112–13).

⁹⁴⁵ Christian C. Joyal, Amélie Cossette and Vanessa Lapierre, 'What Exactly Is an Unusual Sexual Fantasy?', *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 12 (2015), 328–40.

⁹⁴⁶ *Orts*, p. 9.

issues such as identity, childhood, and evil, underscored by numerous biblical references. This is a very concrete and ‘realist’ theological work.

I have not formally defined human imagination, but if one considers this as essentially a high-level cognitive faculty allowing us to make sense of lived reality by providing a perspective higher than the ambiguities of lived experience and convictions about the past, and bridging the two,⁹⁴⁷ then this text may be viewed as a fairy child—personified imagination, if you like—standing above the battle for religious truth, offering an alternative epistemological perspective. Plotz disparagingly suggested that the Romantic child is, in Emerson’s words, ‘the perpetual Messiah which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise’.⁹⁴⁸ This text is just such a fairy child. Since ‘paradise’ for MacDonald is the kingdom of the childlike ruled by the child-king—a place where ‘the spirit of children [is the] pervading spirit throughout, from lowly subject to lowliest king’⁹⁴⁹—MacDonald’s children plead with us to return to *childhood*. It is a protest against adulthood with its pretensions, conventions, idolatry, and self-centredness, forcing a reconsideration of adulthood and the world in which ‘adults’ live.

8.2 The theological implications of MacDonald’s methodology in *Lilith*

8.2 (a) An alternative epistemology—shape-shifting truth

Lilith is a lesson in imaginative ‘fiduciary hermeneutics’. The shape-shifting characters and mirage-like set underline the need for subjective interaction with presenting states of affairs: the truth of such states (apparent meaning) cannot be accepted at face value, neither is ‘naming’ them adequate. Instead, the reader (of both this narrative and God’s ‘artwork’ of life), must engage with the truth—it must be personally evaluated and internalised in the same way that faith cannot simply remain *assensus*, but must become *fiducia*, *fidelitas*, and *visio*.⁹⁵⁰ The word must become flesh in the sense outlined by Nishitani (it must make a difference to the way we live).

⁹⁴⁷ Neuroscience concurs with this view. Iain McGilchrist writes: ‘It is the faculty of imagination [...] which comes into being between the two hemispheres, which enables us to take things back from the left hemisphere [convictions about the past] and make them live again in the right [lived experience]. It is in this way, not by meretricious novelty, that things are made truly new once again’ (*The Master and His Emissary*, p. 199).

⁹⁴⁸ Note 156.

⁹⁴⁹ *USI*, pp. 14–15.

⁹⁵⁰ Page 28.

Similarly, MacDonald emphasises that human engagement with Christ—for Augustine, the art or ‘skill of the omnipotent and wise God’⁹⁵¹—is also an aesthetic encounter:

The reality of Christ’s nature is not to be proved by argument. He must be beheld. The manifestation of Him must “gravitate inwards” on the soul. It is by looking that one can know.

This beatific vision is contrasted with ‘notions whose chief strength lay in their preconception’, in other words, the conclusions of prior generations. The latter, reminiscent of J. H. Newman’s ‘notional assent’ (distilled from general principles rather than experienced personally),⁹⁵² is mere theory:

For a man to theorize theologically in any form, while he has not so apprehended Christ [...] is to bring on himself [...] such errors as the expounders of nature in old time brought on themselves, when they speculated on what a thing must be, instead of observing what it was; this *must be* having for its foundation not self-evident truth, but notions whose chief strength lay in their preconception.⁹⁵³

Lilith, especially, proposes that humans were not made to live in such a ‘library’ of second-hand wisdom, nor that mere logic will decode the riddle of life—especially when it comes to evil. I will refer to these contrasting views of truth as ‘aesthetic’ and ‘conventional’.

There are period-specific distractions. For example, Eve is always the server who sets bread and wine on the table,⁹⁵⁴ Adam supervises not only her but the world in general, and all the women are mothers (including Lilith, her main failure being to reject that role). Vane’s infatuation with Lona, a girl half his age,⁹⁵⁵ is also worrying to the modern reader:⁹⁵⁶ she represents the male fantasy of a submissive virgin who caresses the face of her ‘king’ with childlike adoration.⁹⁵⁷ These, however, should not distract from some very precise theological, philosophical, and moral proposals.

⁹⁵¹ Dods, Marcus, ed., *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*, 15 vols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1872–1876), vol. VII ‘On the Trinity’ (1873), p. 177 (*De Trinitate* VI. 10).

⁹⁵² ‘Theology, as such, always is notional, as being scientific; religion, as being personal, should be real; but, except within a small range of subjects, it commonly is not real in England’ (*Grammar of Assent*, p. 53).

⁹⁵³ ‘Browning’s “Christmas Eve”’, *Orts*, pp. 206–07.

⁹⁵⁴ *Lilith*, pp. 38, 295, 297.

⁹⁵⁵ Biologically so, but in ‘reality’ thousands of years old.

⁹⁵⁶ Note 350.

⁹⁵⁷ The children and Lona call Vane ‘king’ (*Lilith*, pp. 314–15); on Vane’s reappearance after absence, Lona is full of ‘silent delight, expressed mainly by stroking [his] face and hands’ (*ibid.*, p. 228).

The first of these relates to aesthetic truth. Like Jesus leading the blind man out of his village,⁹⁵⁸ this fairy child leads the reader away from the bickering of contemporary religion, offering a wider perspective—away from preconceptions, presuppositions, and the familiarity of conventional ‘village’ life. At first we see an odd landscape, ‘men like trees walking’, but, like Jesus, MacDonald’s agenda is not just to give sight, but to wake new vision—new categories, new ‘visual vocabulary’, a new lens through which to view reality.

The narrative specifically highlights the destructiveness and provisionality of conventional truth. As MacDonald remarks elsewhere: ‘What many men call their beliefs, are but the prejudices they happen to have picked up.’⁹⁵⁹ So, perhaps with the Leicester Conference or the ‘down grade’ controversies in mind, he has skeletal fighters slaughtering one another in a dark forest (dark religion) screaming out ‘*The Truth! The Truth!*’ while Lilith calmly orchestrates the destruction from above.⁹⁶⁰ ‘The holiest words went with the most hating blow’, and, in an image that brings to mind those such as the self-appointed and pugnacious protector of Congregationalism, John Campbell,⁹⁶¹ MacDonald has one frenetic fighter ‘who wheeled ever in a circle, and smote on all sides’.

Lilith, then—drinking the blood of children and given form and substance by the Vanes of this world—is both a product of dark religion (the ‘pitcher of Calvinism’; the ‘false form of true religion’)⁹⁶² and the idol at its centre demanding worship and orchestrating the infighting. This narrative does not, therefore, simply champion unchecked imagination; there is a caveat: demons are reified and vivified by human imagination. Rather, it is promoting cognitive balance; that imagination is needed for, indeed the leader in, healthy cognition—*not* that rationalising is redundant. Vane’s problem is that he ‘saw not, felt not, and yet [was deluded into thinking that he] knew’,⁹⁶³ a knowing that gives substance to Lilith. Had he truly ‘seen’ and ‘felt’—that is, remained cognisant of the wider divine context beyond himself—he would have recognised that he was responsible for nourishing, ‘hosting’, evil.

⁹⁵⁸ Mk 8.22–26.

⁹⁵⁹ *HG*, p. 209.

⁹⁶⁰ *Lilith*, pp. 71–72.

⁹⁶¹ Page 168.

⁹⁶² Pages 99 and 105.

⁹⁶³ *Lilith*, p. 200 (see page 196).

So although imaginative, this narrative does not propose that *anything* may be imagined. Aesthetic truth is the ‘topmost stone’ of something, ‘the thing it is made for’ and is, ironically, a warning against being too imaginative and attributing false meaning to something which has ‘obvious’ meaning (after all, ‘To men who are not simple, simple words are the most inexplicable of riddles’).⁹⁶⁴ This may seem a bit rich coming from an author with an idealist vision who, according to Ruskin, reads whatever he likes from presenting phenomena, but it is a warning against reading badly, of accepting ‘unacceptable’ truth—truth that fundamentally corrodes understanding of ‘The Truth’.⁹⁶⁵ If the beatific vision is not held in view, the result is ‘such errors as the expounders of nature in old time brought on themselves, when they speculated on what a thing must be, instead of observing what it was’.⁹⁶⁶ For example, MacDonald’s conviction that God is light means that he cannot accept Dante’s ‘hell of exhausted mercy’.⁹⁶⁷ His advice—following Newman’s dictum that ‘no religion is from God which contradicts our sense of right and wrong’⁹⁶⁸—is to beware of attributing to God ungodly attributes: ‘If any statement is made, any word employed, that we feel unworthy of the Lord, let us refuse it.’⁹⁶⁹

Better to refuse even the truth for a time, than, by accepting into our intellectual creed that which our heart cannot receive, not seeing its real form, to introduce hesitation into our prayers, a jar into our praises, and a misery into our love. If it be the truth, we shall one day see it another thing than it appears now, and love it because we see it lovely; for *all* truth is lovely.⁹⁷⁰

Just as art is a conversation between artist and observer, aesthetic truth stresses the need for a different way of seeing; the imprecision of truth-claims does not necessarily imply inadequacy, simply that humans are dealing with ‘the beauty of the infinite’. MacDonald’s agenda, therefore, is not to help us accurately (albeit imaginatively) perceive specific truth-claims, but to waken our imagination to the wider context, the depth of God’s art. In *Lilith*, at every page-turn we encounter defamiliarization and paradox: fairy vision does not resolve paradox, but creates it, forcing readerly engagement. ‘What,’ one must ask, ‘does *this* mean?’ MacDonald’s thesis is

⁹⁶⁴ *USI*, p. 68.

⁹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

⁹⁶⁶ See note 953.

⁹⁶⁷ *AF*, II, 195.

⁹⁶⁸ *Grammar of Assent*, p. 414.

⁹⁶⁹ *US3*, p. 184.

⁹⁷⁰ *USI*, p. 70.

that such engagement is, at least in part, responsible for *creating* reality. An individual's reality may be a construct forged by the interaction of subjective experience and objective 'others', but he goes further, suggesting that human consciousness, made in the image of God, partners with God in the creation of those 'others' and therefore has a moral responsibility to discern and act wisely.

A failure to perceive accurately a presenting state of affairs, allied to a preoccupation with self, results in evil—Vane resurrecting Lilith, the enemy of children. In contrast, true perception and selflessness helps to create a new heaven and the new earth. In *Lilith*, with such revitalised vision, Vane walks through the land where previously monsters had erupted from beneath his feet:

it was a summer-day more like itself, that is, *more ideal*, than ever man that had not died found summer-day in any world. I walked on the new earth, under the new heaven, and found them *the same as the old, save that now they opened their minds to me, and I saw into them.*⁹⁷¹

It suggests that the external 'artwork' of the world is almost entirely shaped by the viewer, that, as Carlyle had put it, 'Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea and *body* it forth',⁹⁷² but, rather than this being solely God's idea, that human ideas play a creative, and major, part. Here, for example, Vane's experience of the 'new heaven and earth' is considered entirely a matter of perception: 'A wondrous change had passed upon the world—or was it not rather that a change more marvellous had taken place in us?'⁹⁷³ The obverse of this is that evil results from human ideas not chiming with God's: that evil is both the creation and subjective experience of people whose God-consciousness is dimmed—that evil is located in consciousness rather than context (a prevalent nineteenth century view).⁹⁷⁴ These propositions are discussed more fully below.

⁹⁷¹ *Lilith*, p. 340 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁷² *Sartor Resartus* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1872), p. 49.

⁹⁷³ *Lilith*, p. 337.

⁹⁷⁴ *EE*, p. 406.

8.2 (b) The child against the vampire

In *Lilith*, the identity of the fairy child offering us this alternative epistemology is not immediately apparent. The Little Ones, for reasons identified by Milbank and Tolkien,⁹⁷⁵ are more parodic than metaphoric. Eve's observation that '[s]ooner or later all will be little ones'⁹⁷⁶ seems more of a threat than a promise. Their childlikeness represents absolute trust but little more. Their main role in the narrative is as a mirror by which other characters establish their credentials. They reveal Vane's naivety (ironically by being naive in the extreme themselves), Lilith's vampirism, and Mara and Eve's motherliness. They also prompt reflection on the idea of a colony of children growing up in Lilith's territory, an irony not lost on Adam.⁹⁷⁷ One might also ask why some are 'elected' for salvation by Mara while others are left to become vampire prey. These issues are worthy of reflection but we do not view the world through their eyes.

The obvious candidate is Vane; however, he is hardly a child. Not only has he just come of age, he is obsessed with a girl he hardly knows (who reminds him of his mother), is erotically attracted to a vampire, prefers war to diplomacy, has delusions of becoming king and restoring the crumbling city (with Queen Lona by his side), ignores the advice of supreme beings, and prefers reading 'science' books. His 'logical' military campaign to liberate the city is criticised by Adam as unimaginative.⁹⁷⁸ While Adam, Eve and Mara are, in a sense, perfect children, I suggest the main child protagonist of this 'autobiographical' novel is MacDonald himself in the guise of Vane. As son Ronald remarked in 1911, 'there has probably never been a writer whose work was a better expression of his personal character', continuing:

The ideals of his didactic novels were the motive of his own life. [...] we have had until lately a poet [...] living among us a life of literal, and, which is more, imaginative consistency with his doctrine.⁹⁷⁹

In this 'realist fantasy', MacDonald uses symbol and metaphor to paint as accurate a picture as he can of his vision of idealist reality and places within this ambiguous world an un-ideal

⁹⁷⁵ Note 881.

⁹⁷⁶ Note 933.

⁹⁷⁷ *Lilith*, p. 208.

⁹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 195–98.

⁹⁷⁹ 'George MacDonald', p. 59.

child—himself. Compared to the idealised children we have met in his ‘realist’ novels—whom he places in fantasy worlds that *look* like Aberdeen or London but where evil, it seems, is of little consequence—Vane appears normal. That he struggles to make sense of his world and often fails to make wise decisions does not make him less of a human child, simply a more real one. If childhood inheres primarily in a submissive and obedient response to divine transcendent cues, then Vane is a child in the making. The sun, waking his fairy vision by revealing the picture in his library ‘as if for the first time’, begins the process. Realisation dawns that his ancestor in the picture was once a human like himself, a predecessor who had worked out from first principles the content of many of the books now in his ‘library’ (his consciousness). He realises that he is not an ‘isolated, punctiliar, psychic monad’,⁹⁸⁰ but is connected—not just to ancestors, but to a transcendent reality. The autobiographical dialogue reinforces this, but (like that other ‘autobiographical’ narrative of the mind, *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, that also, in many regards, offers a more faithful sketch of the human condition) it is primarily the description of mind rather than body (in the philosophical sense) that allows no other reading.

This is not to say that MacDonald sees his mind as unconnected with others. From his perspective, action and set are objective realities, but are, and can only be, phenomenally perceived by that mind. It is his theological picture of an idealist world, but not his view of total reality: transcendent reality beyond the ‘second death’ is hinted at, but inaccessible. *Lilith* is his dramatization of the interaction between quotidian human existence and the purgatorial realm where God prepares his children for the second death (although both, it seems, are purgatorial). Like Diamond, he is visiting the back of the North Wind. Apart from Lilith’s proleptic experience of the fire of God, it is notable that even in this purgatorial realm God remains hidden. Christ is only hinted at in bread and wine. Even purgatory demands, and fosters, faith.

Considering MacDonald as a fairy-child author is revealing. Having his own particular view of Christian childhood, he writes as a child, not only to foster the same in others, but by appealing to mutual childhood. His goal is to engage his ‘child’ readers empathetically and wake their imagination. But, as the text of *Lilith* makes clear, this child spends much of his time

⁹⁸⁰ *Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 170.

in fairyland: Vane's excursions to the realm of the seven dimensions in this idealist ontology are as real—more real to MacDonald, it seems—than his three-dimensional life.

This appears the source of a two-fold frustration when reading his more realist novels. First, that they seem *childish* rather than *childlike* representations of the world, reflecting Lewis's comments about third-rate authorship. They are a child's sketch that tends to ignore evil and believe the best. They also have the limited perspective of a child. Nevertheless, they have a certain attraction which Lewis described as 'holiness'; an aesthetic attractiveness that communicates truth if one is prepared to overlook technical ability, an attraction dependent on relationship with the child (we do not display the art of unknown children on our fridges). That MacDonald writes 'for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five'⁹⁸¹ is more than a cliché: he is assuming (and fostering) a relationship with the reader, one based on his vision of God as mutual father.

However, the optimistic claim that all humans are already part of God's family could be challenged. Christ, for example, rejected Pharisaical claims to mutual fatherhood with the blunt words: 'You are of your father the devil', 'you are not of God', words, moreover, spoken to 'those Jews who believed Him' whom he yet described as 'slaves to sin'.⁹⁸² This reinforces the observation that MacDonald, the childlike author, is drawing pictures in his nineteenth century nursery. This is not to denigrate his work, simply to note a limited perspective reflecting the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, and that he is drawing for the 'family' around him who in some measure claim, or are familiar with the concept of, religious adherence. He is writing to those who claim childlikeness with a view to encouraging moral integrity. He would also, I believe, not be annoyed at being accused of having a limited perspective, for his methodology and contribution to theology involve undermining those who claim *not* to be subject to such limitations, in other words, those who claim that their own limited 'net of a presumptuous self-styled orthodoxy'⁹⁸³ represents the full truth.

⁹⁸¹ *Orts*, p. 317.

⁹⁸² Jn 8.44, 47, 31, 34.

⁹⁸³ *US3*, p. 150.

The second frustration is that the adult and the child that are MacDonald are often at odds. He insists that a picture must speak for itself:

if I cannot draw a horse, I will not write THIS IS A HORSE under what I foolishly meant for one. Any key to a work of imagination would be nearly, if not quite, as absurd.⁹⁸⁴

The point being that ‘horse’ means nothing to someone who has never encountered one and merely adding a label will not bring enlightenment. However, the adult in him often rises up to add explanatory notes or a sermon or two. Despite stubbornly refusing to explain his work on the basis that ‘[i]f my dog can’t bark, I’m not going to sit up and bark for him’,⁹⁸⁵ he regularly does just that, but from within the text. For example, when Maggie, the ‘honest peasant’ daughter of the soutar (cobbler) in *Salted With Fire* who has just prayed to see God, stumbles across a crying baby on the moors, ‘Her first thought was, “Can that be Himself, come aince again as he came aince afore?”’. On finding the abandoned child under a bush, she ‘claps[ed] it close to her panting bosom’: ‘clearly she thought of nothing but carrying the infant home to her father’. The metaphor of an abandoned child being carried to a loving father is immediately obvious, but MacDonald cannot help informing us that:

Maggie [...] received an instantaneous insight that never left her: now she understood the heart of the Son of Man, come to find and carry back the stray children to their Father and His.⁹⁸⁶

As Voltaire once remarked, ‘*Le secret d’ennuyer est celui de tout dire*’. This failure to separate adult and child is perhaps another expression of T. S. Eliot’s dictum that, in a great writer, the mind which creates must be separate from the mind that suffers.⁹⁸⁷

In MacDonald’s fantasy works, however, this separation is more evident. Especially in *Lilith*, the fairy child author explores fairyland without (on the whole) being chaperoned, censored, or ‘explained’ by the ideal (possibly false) adult companion. As we look through the more honest eyes of this fairy traveller and try to understand the resulting childlike picture—

⁹⁸⁴ *Orts*, p. 321.

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸⁶ *Salted with Fire*, pp. 52–53.

⁹⁸⁷ Note 363.

‘the blossom of it, the thing it is made for’⁹⁸⁸—without being too critical of its execution, we will understand better MacDonald’s ‘theology of the child’.

MacDonald, then, casts himself opposite Lilith—essential negation. If Murdoch Malison is essentially a distorted divinity (the antithesis of the child-God),⁹⁸⁹ Lilith is a distorted creature: she is the anti-child and, therefore, the antichrist. Whereas Christ sheds his blood on behalf of the children, she drinks it. She is also anti her true self: she refuses to accept her God-given identity. So who is she?

Her essential negation has two aspects. First, she is a fallen being, that is, she was given life and a specific identity by God which was then rejected. Being Adam’s first wife, she *was* human but is now ‘bodiless, alone’—a seemingly demonic entity (reflecting Jewish lore). She lusts after childhood (her attraction to the cherubim), but only on her own terms, despising the corresponding need for submission. Exactly what ontological status her body has in this idealist scheme is (forgive the pun) immaterial; the issue is that by her decision to centre her life on herself she is the ultimate example (with the possible exception of the great Shadow) of a *cor curvum in se* that is tending towards non-being.

The second aspect, then, is her need to find an alternative life-source. Since ‘blood’ is needed for life,⁹⁹⁰ her only solution is to live as a vampire. The irony is that in her parasitism she is, indirectly, dependent on the God who has given life to others. All humans, inasmuch as they reject their own God-given identity, are complicit in giving their blood to nourish this anti-christ. Since this is a ‘religious’ act, the primary arena in which the battle for true identity takes place is that of religion, accounting for MacDonald’s particular attention to what are, in his view, distorted religious schemes at whose centre Lilith is both nourished and worshipped.

To summarise, insofar as ‘without shedding of blood there is no remission [of sins],’⁹⁹¹ Lilith, drinking blood, represents unforgiveness, condemnation, and judgement and is therefore guilty of the ‘unforgiveable sin’ since God can only forgive those who want to be forgiven (‘I believe that no man is ever condemned for any sin except one—that he will not leave his sins

⁹⁸⁸ Note 649.

⁹⁸⁹ Page 97.

⁹⁹⁰ ‘Blood [...] is the life of all flesh. Its blood sustains its life’ (Lev. 17.13–14).

⁹⁹¹ Heb. 9.22.

and come out of them, and be the child of him who is his father’).⁹⁹² Her residence at the heart of religion makes it sacrilegious.

In this narrative, both fairy child and vampire are above the battle for ‘*The Truth!*’. Each offers a perspective on the religious war raging at their feet as ‘skeleton and phantoms [fight] in maddest confusion’. As these fight, there are—

Wild cries and roars of rage, shock of onset, struggle prolonged, all mingled with words articulate [...]. Curses and credos, snarls and sneers, laughter and mockery, sacred names and howls of hate. [...] Phantom-throats swelled the deafening tumult with the war-cry of every opinion, bad or good, that had bred strife, cruelty in any world.⁹⁹³

This is MacDonald’s jaundiced view of the nineteenth century war for the truth, one orchestrated by Lilith who moves ‘at her will above the strife-tormented multitudes, now on this front, now on that, one outstretched arm urging the fight’.⁹⁹⁴

The scene closes with a biblical quotation: ‘Just before sunrise, a breeze went through the forest, and a voice cried, “Let the dead bury their dead!”’, words which MacDonald had first used in the sermon *Justice*—a withering critique of the Reformers’ doctrinal efforts, where he states his contrary aim to ‘prevent the dead from burying the living’.⁹⁹⁵ The reader must choose between a Reformed death, or submissive death in Adam’s cemetery.

We will further consider Lilith’s existential status shortly.

8.3 Key theological proposals that emerge from *Lilith*

In *Lilith*, MacDonald’s three-tier universe is evident. First, there is the ‘world of three dimensions’ that I have referred to as quotidian reality; here I will simply call this ‘reality’. Second, there is ‘the world of seven dimensions’; this I will refer to as ‘fairyland’ (I was tempted to call it ‘purgatory’, but, as we will shortly explore, all three tiers are purgatorial). Third, there is the transcendent realm where God is encountered, which I shall refer to as ‘heaven’.

⁹⁹² *US3*, pp. 154–55; cf. note 719.

⁹⁹³ *Lilith*, p. 71.

⁹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁹⁹⁵ *US3*, p. 136.

It will be remembered that a sonnet in *The Diary of an Old Soul* begins: ‘Yestereve, Death came, and knocked at my thin door.’⁹⁹⁶ For MacDonald, a Celt raised on the borders of Faerie, there is only a thin door between reality and fairyland, and much commerce between the two. Fairies are glimpsed occasionally, and reality glows with a numinous presence—both fairy and divine. There are also shared phenomena: trees in fairyland grow through chimneys in the realm of reality, and ‘books’ (humans) intersect both realms. ‘Ah, the two worlds! so strangely they are one’, remarks Adam in *Lilith*, ‘And yet so measurelessly wide apart!’⁹⁹⁷ Temporally they may be divided by human death (a doorway in a faux ‘bookcase’), but ‘physically’ (however that is understood) they are entwined. Both are dream-worlds prior to the final awakening. Together they make up a dualist ‘system of Soul-making’.

Those who might, for example, insist that ‘after death comes judgement’⁹⁹⁸ and object to this scheme must realise that MacDonald has moved the goalposts of death further ‘back’: true death, the sleep in Adam’s cemetery, is the real doorway to heaven. In the meantime, reality *and* fairyland partner together to prepare humans for that final sleep. To this end, commerce between the two realms is humanly possible: Vane’s imaginative excursions to fairyland, and his ‘waking’ back in reality, illustrate this dual citizenship. Thus MacDonald, for example, has confidence that the suicidal Charley will receive a warm welcome in fairyland—that Adam will help him to sleep.

The submission of sleep—choosing to relinquish consciousness—is a prerequisite for the second death, symbolic of the complete renunciation of self-will. Only those so choosing will wake with joy in God’s presence to be embraced as children. Thus the focus in *Lilith* is the purgatorial office of both reality and fairyland preparatory for this moment. It involves the rejection of evil, couched in terms of self-will—the wilful rejection of one’s God-ordained identity. This, however, is beyond the power of enslaved human will. Only by accepting bread and wine prior to the second death can one overcome the power of evil and joyfully embrace the fire of God.

⁹⁹⁶ ‘Diary of an Old Soul’, in *Rampolli*, p. 190 (see page 152).

⁹⁹⁷ *Lilith*, p. 204

⁹⁹⁸ Heb. 9.27, cf. Matt. 25.31–46.

Christ—being the only perfect *imago Dei* who has ‘slept’ perfectly—offers others the power to sleep.

Prior to the second death, then, MacDonald conceives of existence as an iterative process of purgatorial refinement involving commuting (in the mind) between reality and fairyland.⁹⁹⁹ Although after the first death humans might not ‘physically’ be able to return to reality, he is clear that the post-mortem influence of others folds back into reality. Lilith, for one, has continued power over the minds of ‘men’. It is a scheme which is theodically necessary since it goes *some* way to mitigate the thorny issue of dysteleological evil in the ‘vale of soul making’, and anticipates the work of John Hick:

Hick recognises this apparent failure of soul-making teleology in this world, and refers to ‘further scenes of “soul making”’, and a future eschaton where one experiences ‘an infinite good that would render worthwhile *any* finite suffering endured in the course of attaining it’. So he implies a future purgatorial state where soul-making activities might continue, and he proposes a future experience of such profundity that it justifies all suffering.¹⁰⁰⁰

However, for MacDonald, such purgatorial refinement does not (necessarily) end with the second death. First, the sleep in Adam’s cemetery is ambiguous. Those not yet ready to wake in God’s presence (that is, with residual evil that would mean a destructive encounter with God’s fire) are ‘sent back’, ‘waking’ once more in either fairyland or reality, a repeated experience of Vane. So the sleep in Adam’s cemetery is also purgatorial. Finally, the encounter with God is *also* purgatorial in that God’s fire will purge any residual evil and finally purify the soul:

It is not that the fire will burn us if we do not worship thus; but that the fire will burn us until we worship thus; yea, will go on burning within us after all that is foreign to it has yielded to its force, no longer with pain and consuming, but as the highest consciousness of life, the presence of God.¹⁰⁰¹

⁹⁹⁹ According to Waite, this reflects ‘the Kabalistic doctrine of revolution according to Isaac de Loria’ whereby Jewish souls are allowed to return to earth and enter an embryo or an adult:

Revolution occurs (1) For the cleansing of sin; (2) For the fulfilment of a neglected precept; (3) For the leading of others into the right way [...] (4) To receive a true spouse who was not deserved by the soul in the prior revolution (*Doctrine of the Kabbalah*, p. 303).

Items 1 and 4 are particularly evident in *Lilith*.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *Evil and the Mystics’ God*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁰¹ *USI*, p. 31. This reflects Catholic doctrine; Christ himself is ‘purgatory’: see Pope John Paul II, ‘Heaven, Hell and Purgatory’, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2heavn.htm#Purgatory> [accessed 31 March 2016]. Christ is the final ‘door’ to the eternal sheepfold: ‘No one comes to the Father except through Me’ (Jn 14.6; cf. Jn 10.9).

Eve's comment that 'it is well with those that go to sleep young and willing!'¹⁰⁰² implies that this post-(final)-mortem divine encounter can be 'hell' for some. Although I remarked that Lilith 'got off lightly' in her encounter with Adam,¹⁰⁰³ the implication is that her encounter with God—being still in some measure rebellious and having refused bread and wine—will be far from pleasant. If her proleptic experience of this at Mara's hands is indicative, the implication is that she may even be annihilated.

One might, perhaps, read too much into this model, or, indeed, into MacDonald's general tendency towards esotericism and syncretism. His willingness to explore subjects such as evolution and reincarnation should be viewed as exploratory—'aesthetic' engagement with issues to explore what they offer. The *Curdie* stories, for example, feature goblins (regressed humans)¹⁰⁰⁴ who keep macabre 'pets' that are either evolving or regressing. There is also the curious (and depressing) tale of the 'shop in heaven' exploring 'evolutionary reincarnation' where sinners are sent back to earth—

and there must he grow up again, crawling through the channels of thousand-folded difference, from animal to animal, until at length a human brain be given to him, and after generations he become once again capable of being born of the spirit into the kingdom of liberty.¹⁰⁰⁵

The late sermon 'The Hope of the Universe' (1892) likewise explores reincarnation, as well as the mid-century belief that the foetus mirrored the stages of evolutionary ascent *in utero*¹⁰⁰⁶—albeit with the caveat, 'I do not care to spend thought or time, least of all argument' on such ideas. Despite the caveat, however, strong evolutionary ideas regarding creation are expressed.¹⁰⁰⁷

That evolutionary processes are at odds with the idea that the child has some kind of pre-natal heavenly existence is a side-issue: as with his ontology, MacDonald is not concerned with mechanics. Rather, his moral focus is to replace negative views of childhood with positive ones: evolutionary savagery or original sin is replaced by divine evolutionary truth ('evolving truth

¹⁰⁰² Page 204.

¹⁰⁰³ Note 919.

¹⁰⁰⁴ *The Princess and the Goblin*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Thomas Wingfold*, p. 303

¹⁰⁰⁶ *HG*, pp. 214–15.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Page 139.

upon truth in lovely vision’)¹⁰⁰⁸ or the innocence of the *imago Dei*. Whatever the ‘mechanics’, the goal of God’s creation is that ‘child hearts’ might be brought to birth. Similarly, the purgatorial scheme pictured in *Lilith* is more about purpose—that children might be formed—than mechanics.

Further comments are needed about the existential nature of Lilith. First, that she is human. She may be ‘bodiless alone’, but is not a non-human demon. She is Adam’s ex-wife and bore at least one daughter, Lona. Her quintessential rebelliousness, however, has trapped her essence, her ‘spirit’, in fairyland; only through vampirism, ‘possessing’ and feasting on a host, can she revisit and express her lost humanity—a humanity she constantly longs for; a misguided quest for reincarnation on her terms instead of accepting her God-given identity. She, then, like Charley in *Cumbermede* is ‘demonic’: he, however, recognises this—‘*I am a devil*’—she does not. In *Lilith*, MacDonald is illustrating the connectedness of human minds, not only that ideas have power, but that through ideas (in this idealist universe) ancestors haunt us. If evil, these are the ‘principalities’, ‘powers’, ‘rulers of the darkness of this age’, and ‘spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places’ in Vane’s mind that he must overcome.¹⁰⁰⁹ he is ‘born in sin’¹⁰¹⁰—connected to the sin of others—and must renounce this in preparation for sleep.

It may be objected that this reading is pushing MacDonald’s text too far, and that the metaphor rather concerns the need for each Vane to destroy his or her Lilith. However, we face the issue that Vane does not destroy Lilith but (albeit inadvertently) saves her: his good intentions work for evil in the same way that, in MacDonald’s scheme, evil intentions work for good. She is not merely *his* evil alter-ego, but the nemesis of all who aspire to become children. Through the connectedness of minds, MacDonald is suggesting that he, like many others, is nourishing her. However, she is nevertheless an existential fallen being—‘fallen’ in that she has been cast from heaven (no longer free to consort with the cherubim), and, moreover, responsible

¹⁰⁰⁸ *USI*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Eph. 6.12.

¹⁰¹⁰ Note 232.

for the Fall—causing the separation of ‘earth’ and heaven—having subsequently seduced Adam and Eve in the guise of a snake (an identity she struggles to hide).¹⁰¹¹

The ‘larger hope’, therefore, is synonymous with the eschaton, for the precondition for ‘heaven and earth (fairyland and reality) to pass away’¹⁰¹² is for *all* created beings to submit to God: there will be no contrary wills; all will sleep eventually in Adam’s cemetery and exit the two lower realms, at which point those two purgatorial realms will become redundant, paving the way for the new ‘heaven’ and earth where all (now true children) will live with their ‘elder brother’, Christ.¹⁰¹³

Lilith, it appears, was the first to fall, and will be the last to be saved. The warning signs are, however, that her refusal of bread and wine (the last Adam) and insubmissive demeanour towards the first Adam prior to sleeping will result in a rude awakening. She will experience the full force of the wrath of God’s dark fire. However, saved she will be, for in MacDonald’s view:

Annihilation itself is no death to evil. Only good where evil was, is evil dead. An evil thing must live with its evil until it chooses to be good. That alone is the slaying of evil.¹⁰¹⁴

Furthermore, being the last creature in whom all rebellion is focused, her final repentance will be the destruction of the great Shadow. Substanceless and ‘hostless’, the pure will of evil will be extinguished by ultimate *esse*, God’s light. This is MacDonald’s expression of God being ‘all in all’. As Paul writes:

Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.¹⁰¹⁵

At the outset of the previous chapter I suggested *Lilith* was worthy of close reading as two of its core themes were childhood and evil. It is apparent from this discussion that this is one theme: childhood and evil are the poles of a volitional moral continuum. At one extreme we have the vampire, ‘perfect’ disobedient rebellion; at the other, the child, perfect submissive

¹⁰¹¹ This is made clear in the *Zohar* (*Doctrine of the Kabbalah*, p. 259).

¹⁰¹² In Rev. 20:11, at the revelation of God’s face, ‘the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them.’

¹⁰¹³ Christ is referred to as the ‘elder brother’ eight times, for example, in *Unspoken Sermons*.

¹⁰¹⁴ *Lilith*, p. 212.

¹⁰¹⁵ 1 Cor. 15:28.

obedience to the divine will, exemplified perfectly this side of the eschaton by ‘the child in the midst’ that ‘slept’ in perfection and was raised from that submissive sleep. Since God is perfection, that is, as Trinity the perfect example of loving submission, God is the perfect child.

On this account, all God-created beings are located somewhere between these two extremes: none is entirely depraved, just as none is perfect. (Only the great Shadow, being creature-created, is perfect negation; only God is ‘perfect perfection’.) All, therefore, have the potential to turn towards God, and—that this might be a genuine expression of free will—creation, managed by God, conspires to that end by neither forcing obedience, nor allowing slavery to sin (the moral evil in the self or others). All things *do* work together for good, for all: God ensures that the evil generated by creaturely ‘hosts’ ultimately has no power to short-circuit free will; in addition, God uses what *seems* evil, but is really God’s goodness, to bring about reformation.

Chapter 9 The implications of George MacDonald's theology of childhood

9.1 'Death has come through our windows'

George MacDonald's primary theodical aim is to exorcise from faith, particularly Reformed faith, the demons of the past as well as current idols. Lilith and the great Shadow exemplify the fundamental partnership at the root of this demonic infiltration of contemporary religion, that of human will aligned with 'Satan'.

Mara ('bitterness'), the 'cat-woman' guardian of the children in *Lilith*, personifies MacDonald's main question. Her enigmatic fusion of tears and hope as she valiantly tries to protect the children from the vampire is modelled on the 'weeping prophet'. Jeremiah, too, has 'in the wilderness a lodging place for travellers' outside of, and in opposition to, a corrupt city. He voices God's question: 'How shall I deal with the daughter of My people?'¹⁰¹⁶ Lilith embodies this theological conundrum: she was created by God, and like Israel is God's daughter, but is evil. Jeremiah summarises the problem succinctly:

death has come through our windows,
Has entered our palaces,
To kill off the children.¹⁰¹⁷

The great Shadow haunting the streets 'seeking those he may devour', and Lilith's subsequent nocturnal feasting, is at the heart of the drama. Death *has* come through our windows to kill off the children: how did death come to have such brazen access to humanity, and who is responsible?

Since 'windows', for MacDonald, are access points to the human mind, his answer is clear: humans are responsible. They have genuine free will and, therefore, the right—indeed the tendency—to open their 'windows' to evil. Second, all evil is used by God for good purposes. God is sovereign. This familiar theological tension permeates his work. For him, evil is uniquely a question of sin, that is, *all* negative circumstances and experiences result from human rebellion against God, and God's response is an entirely appropriate solution to that rebellion.

¹⁰¹⁶ Jer. 9.7.

¹⁰¹⁷ Jer. 9.21.

But what is that response? How does MacDonald answer God's question: 'How shall I deal with the daughter of my people?' In short, it is to remind God that Lilith *is* God's daughter. Since she is the most depraved created being, 'the vilest of God's creatures',¹⁰¹⁸ all 'lesser' created beings must also be God's children. God must ensure that 'all things work together for good'—for all. God must expose all creation to 'necessary evil' in order to refine and redeem souls. What we call evil is, in reality, 'the best good' in disguise for a person at a particular time;¹⁰¹⁹ the 'aching' we call evil is 'the unpleasant cure of evil',¹⁰²⁰ and if you sin, '[t]hen some evil that is good for you will follow',¹⁰²¹ and so on. Ultimately, as Vane realises, 'evil was only through good!'.¹⁰²²

MacDonald's universe has a divine child of light at its centre opposed to which is a kingdom of darkness ruled by the 'anti-child'. It is a moral metaphor focusing on the nature of God and those made in God's image; however, it is, therefore, also an ontological model: one cannot speak of the moral nature of things 'made' without making ontological claims, however secondary. Put differently, his focus on the 'vale of soul-making' as a moment in an *exitus–reditus* trajectory necessarily demands an account of the nature of that 'vale' and its relationship to the being of God. In this chapter, therefore, we begin by considering the moral and ontological import of MacDonald's thought, beginning with the stage of his drama before looking more closely at the actors.

9.2 'A problematic attitude to the world'

This drama is played out in an ambiguous world. While materiality, the spatio-temporal 'world of three dimensions', is not completely negated, it appears marginalised. In reading his 'realist' works we noted a disconnect between his fictional 'stage' and normal human experience. For J. P. Stern:

¹⁰¹⁸ Note 904.

¹⁰¹⁹ Note 818.

¹⁰²⁰ Note 1030.

¹⁰²¹ Note 885.

¹⁰²² Note 915.

In realism the relation that obtains between a work of literature and the world outside is positive, expressive of a fundamental assent, whereas in idealism it is negative, expressive of a problematic attitude to the world.¹⁰²³

Such a problematic attitude is evident. For example, in *Lilith* there is almost no ‘3D’ action. Although Vane expresses regret that he has neglected to foster relationships with others in the ‘real’ world (‘I had not cared for my live brothers and sisters’),¹⁰²⁴ all that has meaning takes place in his other-worldly mental reality, and the relationships formed *there* uniquely focus on the goal of him finding his true identity conceived as God’s timeless and unchanging idea of who he should be.

It will be objected that MacDonald’s narratives, through their use of fantasy and ‘making strange’, *are* truly concerned with the human quotidian context and force a fresh consideration of that context, however, the problem one faces is that narratives such as *Lilith* tend not to look back on the quotidian world from the other side of fairyland’s hedge, but *away* from it towards the eschaton, and when they do look towards it, it is considered illusory; just a dream.

This devaluing of materiality is theologically problematic as the biblical narrative takes the opposite view. Four issues are of concern.

(i) Creation

The first concerns the stage of the drama. That the mind (both divine and human) plays a key role in the construction of that stage is admitted, and we noted that the truth of the human context must be evaluated ‘aesthetically’, a process involving the subject’s engagement with the ‘art’ of life. But this should not distract from the biblical emphasis on the objective nature of that art, a focus which speaks less of the ontic status of matter as its radical otherness from God. The biblical phrase ‘before the foundation of the world’, for example, implies that God’s being, and certain actions, ‘pre-date’ creation.¹⁰²⁵ Creation also has intrinsic value, so much so that

¹⁰²³ *On Realism*, p. 44.

¹⁰²⁴ *Lilith*, p. 113.

¹⁰²⁵ For example, Jn 17.24; 1 Pet. 1.20.

God will create a new heaven and a new earth, an event, according to Paul, anticipated by a personified creation waiting ‘eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God’.¹⁰²⁶

In contrast, MacDonald, with this verse in mind, says:

I am inclined to believe the apostle regarded the whole visible creation as, in far differing degrees of consciousness, a live outcome from the heart of the living one, who is all and in all.¹⁰²⁷

The ‘degrees of consciousness’ referred to here are the various levels of sentience in creatures, but ‘live outcome’ nevertheless implies a lack of otherness which may be a problem. It would appear to be a Neoplatonic view of the universe—a ‘highly monistic’ version of Platonism, ‘one that posits a superexistent Source of all being that extends itself into various lower levels of being’, where ‘non-materiality is the highest form of reality’, this allied to ‘a belief in some form of immortality’ and ‘that the universe is essentially good’.¹⁰²⁸ Rowan Williams summarises the problem:

There is a growing trend, of course, towards the view finally expressed in the great Plotinus’s work, the source of Neoplatonism, that the entire complex world of things that can be known and talked about depends on or flows out of a simple, wholly unified primary reality, the One; but it would be odd to describe this as an *action* in the way ‘creating’ seems to be an action.¹⁰²⁹

Rather than a ‘fallen’ creation in some sense ‘other’ than God, then, where genuine human free will can have negative consequences (the biblical context of discussions relating to evil), MacDonald focuses on ‘corruption’ as being primarily a good individual’s *sense* of having failed to perfectly achieve God’s ‘idea’. All being is essentially good. Only what is good, says MacDonald, can suffer, for suffering is felt, can only be felt, by that part of a being that longs for deliverance from corruption:

Corruption brings in vanity, causes empty aching gaps in vitality. This aching is what most people regard as evil: it is the unpleasant cure of evil. It takes all shapes of suffering—of the body, of the mind, of the heart, of the spirit. It is altogether beneficent [...].¹⁰³⁰

¹⁰²⁶ Rom. 8.19.

¹⁰²⁷ *HG*, p. 204.

¹⁰²⁸ Hans-Herbert Kögler, in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, pp. 612–13.

¹⁰²⁹ *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 67.

¹⁰³⁰ *HG*, pp. 219–20.

It is this insistence that all suffering (including that orchestrated by the ‘bad fairies’ and ‘all demons’)¹⁰³¹ is ‘the unpleasant cure of evil’ and ‘altogether beneficent’ that raises questions. It appears grounded in a fusion of Neoplatonic monism and Christianity in that, rather than creation being fundamentally other than God, Christ is *already* ‘all, and in all’,¹⁰³² that is, those who suffer do so because they are impenitently encountering the omnipresent Christ. This is a misapplication of Colossians 3:11, which refers to those who ‘were [proleptically] raised with Christ’, not the whole population or cosmos, an error which necessarily makes God complicit in evil. In Paul, however, the present ‘all in all’ applies only to those already citizens of the in-breaking new kingdom.¹⁰³³ That Christ will be ‘all in *all*’ is an eschatological hope rather than a present reality¹⁰³⁴ leaving the question open as to whether the ‘all’ is a residue or the totality of created being. MacDonald believes it is the latter.

For MacDonald, then, materiality is the lower expression of something greater. Nature displays God’s being; the human body is the visible expression of a human soul on a trajectory towards the perfect expression of God’s ‘idea’. This fundamental duality is exemplified in his discussion of Christ’s temptation: ‘the whole Temptation may be regarded as the contest of the seen and the unseen, of the outer and inner, of the likely and the true, of the *show and the reality*’.¹⁰³⁵

(ii) Incarnation, resurrection, and immortality

This dualist leaning contrasts with the New Testament emphasis that, rather than humans needing to escape from, or overcome, materiality, God’s solution to the human condition—that of genuinely destructive evil in the created sphere—was to share, and therefore in some sense redeem, materiality. Christ not only died, but ‘was buried’.¹⁰³⁶ That the risen Christ embodied a new kind of materiality is not the issue: the point is that the incarnation was just that—God ‘putting on’ flesh and blood, a Eucharistic physicality necessary to resolve the estrangement of

¹⁰³¹ Page 150f.

¹⁰³² Note 1027. In MacDonald’s KJV, the phrase ‘all, and in all’ only appears in Colossians. Elsewhere it is ‘all in all’.

¹⁰³³ The ‘brethren’ in 1 Cor. 12.6; ‘the church’ in Eph. 1.23.

¹⁰³⁴ 1 Cor. 15.28.

¹⁰³⁵ *USI*, p. 154 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰³⁶ 1 Cor. 15.4.

physical creatures: ‘as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil’¹⁰³⁷—not that he should destroy physicality.

It is not that MacDonald ignores materiality, rather that in his thought ‘flesh and blood’ are not, as in the New Testament, intrinsic to what it means to be human. Ontologically speaking, he considers materiality as inferior to the spiritual world of divine ideals, and not ‘good’ *in se* as declared by God. Thus salvation—that is, becoming a ‘true’ human morally and existentially—involves escaping from a materiality that is primarily a delusional dream-state (so Novallis).¹⁰³⁸ He emphasises that Christ’s death gives the power to overcome sin and choose righteousness; that in a context of slavery to sin, Christ restores genuine free will by destroying ‘the devil’. Like Plotinus, MacDonald views the descent of the soul into present materiality as a ‘necessary evil’: not evil as such, but a preparatory and transient state prior to reunion with God which, if experienced as evil, is the fault of the individual soul, not of God, but (unlike Plotinus) will be overcome if that soul opens itself to Christ’s ‘devil’-defeating power, that is, the power to overcome *its own* recalcitrance. Christ’s destruction of the devil takes place in the life of each individual.

In contradistinction to the Neoplatonic emphasis on the impersonal return of the many to the One (but, nevertheless, with overtones of personal absorption), for MacDonald, the eschaton is, first and foremost, a *personal* reunion with God prior to which the soul must be purged of all sin through a cyclical process of self-atonement by which the ‘cunning and deceitful Self—ever cunning and deceitful until it is informed of God—[...] is thoroughly and utterly denied, and God is to it also All-in-all—till we have left it quite empty of our will and our regard’.¹⁰³⁹

It is ‘self atonement’ in that the self is responsible for ‘denying itself’ by turning to Christ, followed by ‘[r]epentance, restitution, confession, prayer for forgiveness, righteous deal-

¹⁰³⁷ Heb. 2.14.

¹⁰³⁸ Note 838.

¹⁰³⁹ *US2*, p. 220.

ing thereafter, [which] is the sole possible, the only true make-up for sin. For nothing less than this did Christ die.’¹⁰⁴⁰

MacDonald, then, prioritises the ‘all in all’ becoming *personal* reality as a precursor to a wider eschaton. He does, however, believe in physical resurrection—and, moreover, argues that animals will be resurrected¹⁰⁴¹—this being the final step when God ‘clothes’ God’s newly-embraced children as the ‘prodigal son’ received a new cloak. However, this also relies on the constructive role of the human mind as it partners with God’s. Speaking of the present human body, he writes, for example, that:

There is glory and might in this vital evanescence, this slow glacier-like flow of clothing and revealing matter, this ever uptossed rainbow of tangible humanity. It is no less of God’s making than the spirit that is clothed therein.¹⁰⁴²

As for the resurrection body, ‘since all matter is radiant of spiritual meaning’, it will be—

the same body, glorified as we are glorified, with all that was distinctive of each from his fellows more visible than ever before. The accidental, the non-essential, the unrevealing, the incomplete will have vanished. That which made the body what it was in the eyes of those who loved us will be tenfold there.¹⁰⁴³

This is not a negation of materiality, but is the assertion that the body, especially the resurrection body, is the ‘clothing’ of ‘the idea of each [...] carried out in the perfection of beauty’.¹⁰⁴⁴ Perfect it may be, and ‘no less of God’s making’, but nevertheless subordinate to the spirit it expresses. Set against such bodily perfection is the notion that bodily imperfection and distortion is evidence of distorted (sinful) personhood, Lilith being the ultimate example of this in her ‘anti-theophany’ incarnation as a snake.¹⁰⁴⁵

Undergirding these views of incarnation and resurrection is the view that the soul is immortal. This tacit acceptance of an unbiblical Greek doctrine¹⁰⁴⁶ necessarily leads to universal-

¹⁰⁴⁰ *US3*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁴¹ *HG*, pp. 210–13.

¹⁰⁴² *US1*, pp. 238–39.

¹⁰⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹⁰⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁰⁴⁵ See pages 187 and 223.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Hans Bietenhard, in *Dictionary NT Theology*, II, p. 208; John Wenham, *Facing Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), pp. 241–42.

ism since God, being love, cannot sustain immortal creatures in a state of reprobation, neither (he submits) can they, without reflecting badly on God, be destroyed.¹⁰⁴⁷ The doctrine also renders *physical* resurrection if not redundant then at least a lower state of being. Despite MacDonald's praise of the resurrection body, this is the expression of a higher ideal, an incipient dualism leading to a devaluation of materiality.

In themselves, these ontological observations may seem peripheral in that MacDonald's primary concern is to make moral claims, however the issue is that they reveal flaws in his world view which have moral implications. We consider first the implications for human identity.

(iii) Human identity

The devaluing of the quotidian human context leads to a corresponding devaluing of social interaction as a mechanism that forges human identity (as we noted in the context of Gibbie's muteness and Vane's solipsism, for example). In contrast, Paul's assertions that 'we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another' and that God is creating a 'new man',¹⁰⁴⁸ highlight the positive and mutually-constructive nature of quotidian social interaction that is inherent in human identity. This 'vale of soul-making' forges communities (Israel and the Church being prime examples) as well as individuals, and—as recent scholarship insists—the latter are not only a product of social interaction, but inherently socially constructed.¹⁰⁴⁹ Michael Banner goes as far as saying, 'It is not that we have relationships, but that we are relationships.'¹⁰⁵⁰ Human personhood is not simply a fixed divine idea (discussed further below).

It will be objected that there *is* social interaction in his fiction. Gibbie, for example, is mentored by his adoptive parents, the old shepherd and his wife; the curate, Thomas Wingfold, is similarly coached by the disabled social outcast Polwarth, and so on. However, these relationships generally follow the pattern of the mentor providing a confirmatory rather than a formative

¹⁰⁴⁷ Note 723.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Rom. 12.5; Eph. 2.15.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Explored further below, page 257.

¹⁰⁵⁰ *The Ethics of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 190.

ry role. God is the true coach, present at the poles of being, that is, internally as the ‘candle of consciousness’¹⁰⁵¹ and externally in nature, and mentors are ‘honest peasants’ qualified to fulfil their office by being themselves close to God and nature, having remained untainted by the affectations of culture.

For MacDonald the Romantic, society, with its cultural mores, is a barrier to faith built on pretence, witness the destructive brittle relationships in *Wilfrid Cumberlande*. He writes: ‘It is better to be a child in a green field than a knight of many orders in a state ceremonial.’¹⁰⁵² Thus *Sir Gibbie*’s ascent to the mountain—the ‘grand nursery’ of nature¹⁰⁵³—is contrasted with his persecutor’s (Fergus Duff’s) downward trajectory into the city to become a minister. Farmer’s son Fergus ‘would have been much more of a man if he had thought less of being a gentleman’, and, in a quest to impress what he hopes will be his future congregation, for example, has no qualms about memorising a printed sermon and passing it off as his own.¹⁰⁵⁴

Regarding evil, this devaluing of social interaction as a positive force results in a corresponding denial of socially embedded evil as a destructive force—of the genuine destructiveness of dysfunctional, damaged societies. More broadly, it reflects the view that the Holy Spirit, and ‘the devil’, work primarily through personal, rather than social, means. It equates to a focus on sin rather than evil.

David Kelsey, however, underlines the need for cognitive ‘realism’ in order to articulate ‘with precise, accurate, and full truth just what the condition of the quotidian presently is’, a realism that admits that human relationships are forged ‘in the midst of evil’s deformations’.¹⁰⁵⁵ He notes that, ‘It is important for theological reasons [...] to distinguish between sin and evil’; a failure in this regard results in ‘confusions in theological anthropology’. Whereas humans are morally accountable for the former, the latter acts *on* them through living in a distorted world. So rather than, as MacDonald implies, evil being simply the result of a God-dimmed consciousness, Kelsey writes:

¹⁰⁵¹ Note 60.

¹⁰⁵² *Orts*, p. 226.

¹⁰⁵³ *Gibbie*, p. 188.

¹⁰⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 319–23.

¹⁰⁵⁵ *EE*, pp. 353–54.

By contrast, I want to stress that we neither ascribe nor bestow reality and power to evil conditions or situations as evil; rather we acknowledge their reality and power as we suffer from their energetic reality.¹⁰⁵⁶

While individuals may or may not contribute to aspects of quotidian distortion, such distortion is evil and acts against creaturely good: creatures are recipients of the ‘energetic reality’ of evil, not—at least directly or necessarily—responsible for it. In MacDonald’s work, it does result in ‘anthropological confusion’: whereas Christ, who was ‘without sin’, experienced the full force of destructive evil, characters such as Gibbie or Clare Skymer—also perfect children—do not. The biblical emphasis, in contrast, is that humans are given strength to bear the negativity of evil, not that it will have no purchase.¹⁰⁵⁷

With regard to epistemology, MacDonald’s individualism leads to a corresponding unshakeable belief that an imaginative individual—experiencing God at the poles of being—has the ability to discern truth rightly on the basis that God primarily speaks to individuals. This reflects a nineteenth century climate. Reardon notes, for example, that the erudite Unitarian, James Martineau, later in his career moved away from viewing an infallible Bible as the primary source of revelation:

Rather, if personality is the highest value known to man it is to be expected that revelation will be made through personal media and that the real criterion of divine truth is provided by the heart and conscience. In short, if a man would know the will and purpose of God let him first search the depths of his own nature. The primal authority in religion is experience itself, the inner witness of moral feeling and perception.¹⁰⁵⁸

F. D. Maurice, however, although expressing similar views that all humans have an innate sense of right and wrong, puts his finger on the problem: a person ‘may be very much deceived about his own preference for truth over falsehood in any particular case; he may be bribed to like a lie better than the truth’.¹⁰⁵⁹ Or, as in the case of Charley Osbourne’s domineering religious father in *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, a person may be, perhaps unaware, guilty of

¹⁰⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 406.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Rom. 5.5, 8.35–39.

¹⁰⁵⁸ *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, p. 315.

¹⁰⁵⁹ ‘What is Revelation?’ (1859), in Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 260; cf. Jer. 17.9.

‘branding the truth of religion with the private mark of opinion’.¹⁰⁶⁰ The problem, though, is that such as Osbourne are merely following MacDonald’s advice. Lilith’s success in seducing Vane is also a salutary example of the danger of relying on individual discernment. The issue is that the judgement that such discernment is misguided must necessarily come from others, others who, if MacDonald’s scheme is pushed to its limits, are *de facto* denied an opinion. MacDonald would respond to this by arguing that when the true heart *acts* on perceived truth, God will, if necessary, correct error. He thus locates the problem in volition rather than perception on the basis that humans have the genuine ability to choose the good, should they so desire. However, if, as we sense, Charley Osbourne is truer to life than Sir Gibbie, this argument is refuted: Charley wants to perceive the truth but is prevented by quotidian circumstances. Furthermore, we are faced with the issue of many individuals acting on their perception of the truth resulting in evil consequences that God does not address.

This discussion reveals a general principle when evaluating MacDonald’s work. His emphasis on the need to discern truth personally is not so much a foundational epistemological principle as a pastoral call to obedience underlining two key issues: that faith cannot be second-hand, nor can it remain merely theoretical. His sweeping assertions do not necessarily have universal applicability since he writes pastorally for a specific audience.¹⁰⁶¹ One might observe, for example, that he himself is socially embedded and part of a wide conversation. We have identified numerous voices that have contributed to his understanding of the truth, not least that of childhood Calvinism. It could be argued, for example, that his criticism of faithful Calvinists as possessing faith despite, not because of, their religion might be aimed at himself: he has a vibrant faith despite the shortcomings in his own scheme—a scheme which owes a significant debt to its Calvinist heritage and the input of others. Put differently, he rightly underscores the need to personally evaluate and appropriate truth but in the process has championed a methodology that potentially leads to error. The apostle Paul asserted that even he only ‘knew in part’ and stressed the limited nature of personal prophecy,¹⁰⁶² since we live in a distorted world and

¹⁰⁶⁰ *Cumbermede*, p. 456.

¹⁰⁶¹ Page 117.

¹⁰⁶² 1 Cor. 13.12; Rom. 12.6.

each is subject to a very limited perspective, the truth about God must primarily be discerned communally, not individually.

(iv) Satan's identity and the nature of evil

It is striking that MacDonald's cosmology omits beings such as demons or angels. Such, after all, are staples of fantasy. Where these are mentioned, they appear to be the literary expressions of evil or good *ideas* rather than references to created beings. Their origin is inevitably traced back to either human or divine creative thought; in other words, like Lilith, their existence is contingent. If we are to believe the narrator of *The Shadows*, for example, angels are 'white shadows cast in heaven from the Light of Light', in contrast to earthly shadows which, in a strongly Platonic image, are either frightening 'body ghosts' or good 'soul ghosts'.¹⁰⁶³ It may be objected that the cast of the fairy stories, which includes giants, witches and fairies, refers to such beings, but I would argue that these are either the creations of fantasy (often moral metaphors), or, more often, images symbolic of divine or human being—even children. As MacDonald notes:

all the powers that vivify nature must be children. The popular imagination seems to have caught this truth, for all the fairies and gnomes and goblins, yes, the great giants too, are only different sizes, shapes, and characters of children.¹⁰⁶⁴

In terms of divine images, we have theophanies in the form of 'great-great-grandmothers' (*The Princess and Curdie*) or 'old men' (*The Golden Key*).

Regarding demons, the strongest image is the great Shadow in *Lilith*. For MacDonald, this is the immaterial personification of aggregate human rebellious will, a kind of negative Hegelian *Geist* that will cease to exist when the last human child has repented. This reading is confirmed by Charley Osbourne's words on recognising his own selfishness: his comment, '*I am a devil*',¹⁰⁶⁵ is set within an understanding of cosmic evil that conceives of God as the antithesis of selfishness:

¹⁰⁶³ *Fairy Tales*, pp. 79, 73.

¹⁰⁶⁴ *AF*, I, p. 162.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Page 136.

I am the most selfish creature in the world—always taken up with myself. I do believe there is a devil, after all, *I am a devil*. And the universal self is *the* devil. If there were such a thing as a self always giving itself away—that self would be God.¹⁰⁶⁶

To which his friend Cumbermede replies: ‘Something very like the God of Christianity, I think.’

However, with regard to evil, it is that last *human* child—who was also the original serpent, Lilith—who is Satan. Satan/Lilith is human.¹⁰⁶⁷ All evil, in MacDonald’s view—from first sin to last sin—is down to human rebellion. It is a perennial refrain. Self-worship is devil-worship, a good churchman or a good dissenter can be a devil, ‘*self* is our demon-foe’: only rarely is the urge to rebel attributed to ‘some roar of a wandering bodiless devil’¹⁰⁶⁸ which, if Lilith’s pedigree is to be believed, might simply be a bodiless human rather than a demon (see below). Aware, no doubt, that ‘God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone’, MacDonald, biblically, locates the source of evil in the human heart,¹⁰⁶⁹ but does not put this down, as Jesus did, to the work of the ‘father of lies’, the father of lying Pharisees.¹⁰⁷⁰ For him, Satan is a (human) person who has ‘resisted the truth with some amount of perception that it was the truth’ (echoing Jesus’s verdict on Peter): ‘Is not this to be Satan? to be in hell? to be corruption? to be that which is damned?’¹⁰⁷¹

In the Bible, however, Satan is spoken of as a created non-human being. In the Old Testament he has access to heaven and accuses the righteous;¹⁰⁷² in the New, he has angels at his command,¹⁰⁷³ is referred to by Jesus as the ‘prince of this world’¹⁰⁷⁴ whom he saw ‘fall like lightning from heaven’ and, according to John, ‘was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast

¹⁰⁶⁶ Cumbermede, p. 330.

¹⁰⁶⁷ In the *Zohar*, Samäel and Lilith are inseparable, an unholy hermaphroditic fusion representing a counterfeit Trinity—an ultimately distorted, uncircumcised (that is, rebellious) humanity: ‘SAMAEL is said to be the uncircumcised and his bride [Lilith] is the prepuce [foreskin], which, [the *Zohar*] adds significantly, is the serpent’ (*Doctrine of the Kabbalah*, p. 82). The fusion of Lilith and the Shadow therefore represents the ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ of ultimate human depravity. This reading is confirmed by Mathers. Regarding demons, he writes: ‘Their prince is *Samael*, [...] the angel of poison and of death. His wife is the harlot, or woman of whoredom, [...] and united they are called the beast [...]. Thus the infernal trinity is completed, which is, so to speak, the inverse and caricature of the supernal Creative One’ (*The Kabbalah Unveiled*, p. 30). (Cf. Rahner’s *mysterium iniquitatis*, page 240.)

¹⁰⁶⁸ *USI*, p. 145; *US3*, p. 242; *US2*, p. 155; Cumbermede, p. 92.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Mk 7.21; Matt. 15.19.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Jn 8.24.

¹⁰⁷¹ *USI*, pp. 89, 90.

¹⁰⁷² Job 1.6–2.7, cf. Zech. 3.1.

¹⁰⁷³ Matt. 25.41, cf. Paul’s ‘messenger of Satan’, II Cor. 12.7.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Jn 6.11; 12.31; 14.30.

out with him'.¹⁰⁷⁵ But is this merely an anthropomorphism of evil? After all, a personified 'Death' will be thrown into the lake of fire as well as 'Satan and his angels';¹⁰⁷⁶ the former can only be metaphoric—why not the latter? It is also unclear whether Jesus's followers are to pray 'deliver us from evil', or 'deliver us from the evil one', and some have argued that since the Bible never speaks of the salvation of Satan, he cannot be personal.¹⁰⁷⁷ What issues are relevant here?

One key issue is MacDonald's attribution of 'evil' to God, permissible only if evil *is* a good: in this sanitised (apparently) monist cosmos without demons, this is logically possible (indeed necessary) and, on the surface, biblical. There are numerous biblical allusions to God both creating and controlling evil: did not God place a tree of good *and* evil in the garden?; 'If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?'; and did not 'the Spirit of the Lord depart from Saul' to be replaced by 'a distressing spirit from the Lord'?¹⁰⁷⁸ The theme continues into the New Testament. According to John, for example, writing concerning 'ten kings' who 'make war with the Lamb': 'God has put it into their hearts to fulfil His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.' In the apocalyptic setting of Revelation, Satan does appear to be God's evil sheepdog, sometimes on a short leash.¹⁰⁷⁹

MacDonald's understanding of evil is limited since a monist cosmos, understood as the expression of God's good thoughts, cannot admit evil creatures or destructive distortion without indicting God. Instead, and worryingly, God sometimes masquerades, or is perceived, as the devil. For example, commenting on John's observation, quoting Isaiah, that unbelief is because 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest [...] I should heal them',¹⁰⁸⁰ MacDonald suggests that 'in St. John's reference, the blinding of the heart seems attributed directly to the devil'. In other words, 'he', in this verse, is the devil who has blinded people to prevent them turning to God. The Isaiah passage quoted (6.10), though, implies 'he' is Isaiah, God's

¹⁰⁷⁵ Lk. 10.18; Rev. 7.9.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Rev. 20.10, 14.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ernst Achilles, in *Dictionary NT Theology*, 1, p. 566.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Amos 3.6; 1 Sam. 16.14.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Rev. 17.17; cf. 20.1–5.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Jn 12.40.

agent, bearing—and in some sense enacting—the message of judgement to his peers, and the following verse (in John) suggests that ‘he’ is Christ: ‘These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.’ Perhaps MacDonald is thinking of ‘the god of this age’ blinding people to the truth,¹⁰⁸¹ but the point is that for him the distinction is trivial:

Whether this [blindness] follows as a psychical or metaphysical necessity, or be regarded as a special punishment, it is equally the will of God, and comes from him who is the live Truth. They shall not see what is not for such as they.¹⁰⁸²

In other words, if it is the devil, he is simply doing God’s will; if God, it is God perceived badly, for as he notes: ‘God must be terrible to those that are far from him’—so much so that such ‘must prefer a devil’.¹⁰⁸³ On this view, the French Revolution must be labelled ‘the righteous plague of God’, at least by permission: when there is contempt for the truth, ‘the wild beast in man breaks from its den’.¹⁰⁸⁴

This blurring of the boundaries between good, evil, and sin weakens MacDonald’s theology simply because in his quest to rehabilitate God he has made God complicit in evil. This is not because he views God as other than pure light; on the contrary, a core theme is ‘in Him there is no darkness’.¹⁰⁸⁵ Rather, it is his reluctance to concede that genuine depravity exists that cannot be co-opted for good and must be destroyed, or to allow that events such as the Lisbon earthquake serve no good purpose. As one contemporary put it:

His optimism scarcely allows him to reckon with the terrors that sometimes run riot in the world. [...] He ignores the scientific interpretation of Nature, and never attempts to adjust it to his rosy Wordsworthian aestheticism.¹⁰⁸⁶

This theological problem becomes sharper when one compares the ‘marriage’ of Lilith and the great Shadow to that of the antichrist and the beast in Revelation. As von Balthasar notes, ‘The whole abyss of the *mysterium iniquitatis* yawns in the way it opposes the *mysterium*

¹⁰⁸¹ 2 Cor. 4.4.

¹⁰⁸² *US2*, pp. 99–100.

¹⁰⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 159. In *The Princess and Curdie*, the great-great-grandmother, the ‘Mother of Light’, says that a thief would perceive her as a demon: ‘his evil eyes would see me as I was not’ (note 132).

¹⁰⁸⁴ *England’s Antiphon*, pp. 303–04.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *US3*, pp. 163–81.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Thomas G. Selby, *The Theology of Modern Fiction* (London: C. H. Kelley, 1896), pp. 137, 140.

Trinitatis.¹⁰⁸⁷ We have already noted how Lilith, with her counterfeit stigmata and Eucharist, represents that opposition. Von Balthasar notes that at every level, ‘the blasphemous structure of the trinity of hell [Antichrist, beast, and dragon] contradicts the divine Trinity in every last detail’.¹⁰⁸⁸ The beast, too, has a fake wound; it, like Lilith, stages a fake resurrection; it also represents a fake incarnation: the dragon does not ‘beget’ the beast from itself, it arises out of the sea, a product of creation. Von Balthasar remarks:

there is nothing here of divine self-emptying and so nothing of the Trinity’s self-disclosure and truth. The Dragon, absolute evil, remains hidden behind its hideous offspring and utterance, the beast [it has ‘blasphemy’ written all over it], but in such a way that the latter continues to put forth its monstrous seductive power [over all tribes and nations].¹⁰⁸⁹

Lilith, one might say, assuming the outward form of love (her true nature is snake-like)¹⁰⁹⁰—the ‘monstrous seductive power’ made visible—represents the Whore of Babylon, one who feeds on the ‘merchants of the earth’ who eventually mourn the destruction of her city.¹⁰⁹¹ The issue is simply this: inasmuch as both the Whore and Lilith are personifications of seductive evil, they must be destroyed (‘her smoke rises up for ever and ever’),¹⁰⁹² neither are they in any sense human: the beast is a product of creation. As a metaphor for the last deposit of aggregate evil will in humanity, Lilith serves an illustrative role, but to suggest that somehow she will be reconciled with ‘Adam’ and live in eternal bliss makes a mockery of Revelation’s claim that in the Whore—as in Lilith—‘was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all who were slain on the earth’¹⁰⁹³—blood that cries for vengeance, that is, genuine justice: ‘And she will be utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judges her.’¹⁰⁹⁴ Put simply, if God’s eschatological embrace of Lilith did not result in her annihilation, ‘blasphemy’ would be found in God.

¹⁰⁸⁷ *Theo-Drama*, p. 450.

¹⁰⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 451; cf. note 1067.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹⁰ Page 187.

¹⁰⁹¹ According to *Zohar*, I. 86a, ‘the female of Samäel, which is the serpent, is called the harlot’ (*Doctrine of the Kabbalah*, p. 260).

¹⁰⁹² Rev. 19.3.

¹⁰⁹³ Rev. 18.24.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Rev. 18.8.

To summarise, in my view, MacDonald's theodicy is flawed in that—ironically for one suspicious of 'intellect'—he has been over-rational in his approach to what is essentially a mystery. Two fundamental assertions are made. The first: God is good, all has been created by God, therefore evil is essentially good—an untenable proposition as it ignores the biblical emphasis on the destructiveness and depravity of evil as a force that not only destroys creaturely wellbeing, but also *opposes* God. One may assert, with Paul, that 'all things work together for good', but, contrary to MacDonald's understanding, this must be qualified, first, by the recognition that this applies to those consciously choosing to 'love Christ', and second, that the Bible suggests that this good may not be evident until the eschaton; after a 'judgement'. The second assertion is: since evil is uniquely the result of human wilfulness resulting from genuine free will, evil will be destroyed when the last human rebel repents—a proposition ignoring the significant biblical attribution of evil to non-human creatures and a fundamentally distorted cosmos. As we will explore shortly, one may legitimately posit that God is responsible for evil, but only with respect to its resolution, not its genesis. Nevertheless, as we explore further below, MacDonald's focus on God's love as the deepest and most powerful force in the universe is a welcome antidote to an 'infernal toxicity' infecting Western Christianity that assumes most of God's good creation will be consigned to hell.¹⁰⁹⁵

9.3 'If we are not little ones of a perfect love, I can see no sense in things'

These observations regarding shortcomings in MacDonald's view of evil must be borne in mind but do not nullify his work. As Thomas Toke Lynch remarked (as quoted by MacDonald):

the critic is more than the censurer; and in his higher and happier aspect appears before us and serves us, as the discoverer, the vindicator, and the eulogist of excellence.¹⁰⁹⁶

What 'excellence' is revealed by MacDonald's child?

First, the child challenges the conventional approach to cognition and epistemology. Imbalance is evident in Victorian views on children and childhood: that the practice of female genital mutilation, for example, would cure insanity; that female education would reduce fertility;

¹⁰⁹⁵ See page 252.

¹⁰⁹⁶ *Orts*, p. 220.

that children are born deaf, and so on.¹⁰⁹⁷ Not only did such views negatively impact children, they also reveal the tenuousness of the underlying epistemology which, we noted, did not distinguish between reality and fiction. Conservative and liberal Evangelical beliefs, likewise, did not, at least to sceptics, ‘ring true’. Neither the Romantic or positivist perspective, when it came to children or religion, appeared to offer a reasonable account of lived reality. Against this backdrop, MacDonald echoes Jesus’s call to become childlike: apart from the moral and religious implications discussed, it is also a call for a more balanced cognitive approach emphasising the need to contextualise knowledge within a wider field and to be suspicious of truth-claims that appear to offend wider moral or logical sensibilities.

Those wider ‘sensibilities’ included openness to scientific and philosophical advances. The child represents an attitude of wonder to an evolving world not constrained or intimidated by revelation, from whatever quarter, on the basis that God not only indwells the world, but faith is beyond the vicissitudes of evolving world views. The year that MacDonald died, Einstein produced his theory of relativity. We now have advanced quantum mechanics, we understand more the processes of evolution, and the term ‘big bang’ (anticipated in Boehme’s ‘lightning strike’)¹⁰⁹⁸ is no longer a term of derision. MacDonald’s legacy is a child who is at peace in such a changing world.

Second, the child functions imaginatively, that is, is aware of a wider context, not simply intellectually but associatively. It will be remembered that one of Plotz’s criticisms of the Romantics was, citing Piaget, that their emphasis on the child’s connectedness with nature was unhealthy; that, instead, disassociation—the awareness of individuality—was necessary for healthy development.¹⁰⁹⁹ However, it could be argued that we have become ‘over dissociated’. Recent work has claimed, for example, that humans have, to their detriment, completely lost a sense of connectedness to the cosmos or to divinity and in the process become disassociated from the human family, with catastrophic environmental consequences.¹¹⁰⁰ In contrast, ‘when

¹⁰⁹⁷ Page 43f.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Page 134.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Page 37.

¹¹⁰⁰ *Making All Things New*, p. 30.

we receive the child in the name of Christ [...] we receive all humanity'.¹¹⁰¹ The child reminds us of the need to connect imaginatively with 'nature', to discern its 'catholicity', that is, a sense of the wholeness and connectedness of the cosmos,¹¹⁰² to sense the abductive drawing of the Spirit, to sense the numinous in the mundane. MacDonald's child is perhaps intuitively anticipating the post-Einstein equation of energy with matter. Although I have been somewhat critical of MacDonald's idealist negation of materiality, it reflects the view that God, as the loving and sustaining 'mind-energy' of the universe *is* intimately invested and present in the cosmos; a recognition that 'Heaven unfolds when we see the world for what it truly is, "pregnant with God"',¹¹⁰³ a reminder, as Rowan Williams remarked, that 'the overcoming of "nature" as a proper goal for spirituality is highly problematic'.¹¹⁰⁴

Finally, the child challenges conventional Christian power narratives based on a false fundamentalism. As 'the child in the midst' represents dependence and humility, so 'the spirit of children' is the pervading spirit of the kingdom of God, 'from lowly subject to lowliest king',¹¹⁰⁵—a challenge to unthinking emphases on God's sovereignty and the quest for Christendom. MacDonald writes:

Not all the sovereignty of God, as the theologians call it, delegated to the Son, and administered by the wisdom of the Spirit that was given to him without measure, could have wrought the kingdom of heaven in one corner of our earth. Nothing but the obedience of the Son, the obedience unto the death, the absolute *doing* of the will of God because it was the truth, could redeem the prisoner, the widow, the orphan. But it would redeem them by redeeming the conquest-ridden conqueror too, the stripe-giving jailer, the unjust judge, the devouring Pharisee himself with the insatiable moth-eaten heart.¹¹⁰⁶

Even divine sovereignty, supported by all the resources of heaven, cannot alone inaugurate the kingdom of God. The 'idea of the universe' is the father–son relationship,¹¹⁰⁷ and only loving obedience, not coercion, can be the foundation of a kingdom of love. The god of popular reli-

¹¹⁰¹ *USI*, p. 16.

¹¹⁰² *Making All Things New*.

¹¹⁰³ *Making All Things New*, p. 96. The quotation is from *Angela of Foligno: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

¹¹⁰⁴ *On Christian Theology*, p. 69.

¹¹⁰⁵ *USI*, pp. 14–15 (page 208).

¹¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–59.

¹¹⁰⁷ David Kelsey notes that this 'idea' dates back to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (*EE*, p. 63).

gion, demanding obeisance, is a human creation, an imposter. The Son, obedient unto death and *doing* the will of the Father, releases transformative power to redeem society, a power available to those who, paradoxically, also make the choice to die. The Son, the perfect child, is our model, and the appropriate human response is to likewise live as a child, that is, to die, death being the renunciation of personal sovereignty (the essence of sin), the doorway to true life rather than its cessation. Salvation inheres in Christ being ‘all in all’, including oppressors: sin is defeated when sinners repent, not when they are condemned. He concludes: ‘The earth should be free because Love was stronger than Death.’¹¹⁰⁸

Williams’s comment above follows the observation:

creation is not an exercise in divine power, odd though that certainly sounds. Power is exercised by *x over y*; but creation is not power, because [being *ex nihilo*] it is not exercised on anything.¹¹⁰⁹

The point is that creation is ‘unnecessary’—a gift expressing the graciousness of God, but not needed by God to complete God’s identity.¹¹¹⁰ In a sense, creation represents God’s playfulness, the perfect, joyful expression of the divine ‘child’ which, for Robin Stockitt, is ‘fundamentally concerned with aesthetics [...] enjoyment, beauty, joy and delight’. This understanding of the ‘pointlessness’ of creation does not necessarily imply purposelessness; play may have ‘profoundly purposeful’ outcomes.¹¹¹¹ It does, however, challenge the nineteenth century tendency to view creation as a moral exam presided over by an unforgiving headmaster. Thus for Stockitt, ‘The very heart of the coming kingdom of God announced by Christ is portrayed in terms that insist that we become like children.’¹¹¹²

In my view, though, Stockitt is wrong to suggest that ‘[i]t is to George MacDonald’s credit that he was sufficiently prescient to realize that the playfulness of God would one day need to be explored in much greater detail’: MacDonald, as we have noted, views reality as a

¹¹⁰⁸ *USI*, p. 159.

¹¹⁰⁹ *On Christian Theology*, p. 68.

¹¹¹⁰ *Theo-Drama*, p. 323. Delio makes this error by suggesting that:

Divinity and humanity have, from the birth of consciousness, been opposites united in an ongoing process of mutual redemption. Both divinity and humanity are related to each other from the outset and attain the completion of their respective consciousness in the reciprocity of their relationship (*Making All Things New*, p. 88).

¹¹¹¹ *Imagination and the Playfulness of God*, p. 102.

¹¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

‘school time’ rather than a playground. He does, though, suggest that we are imaginative children loved by a ‘playful’ (though somewhat Victorian and moralizing) God. As he concludes: ‘If we are not little ones of a perfect love, I can see no sense in things.’¹¹¹³

9.4 ‘His quarrel is with all churches at home and abroad’

‘Evangelical Christianity,’ writes David Hempton of the nineteenth century situation, ‘under the pressure of new and threatening questions, was particularly prone to fundamentalist answers, thereby further undermining its appeal to thoughtful adherents.’¹¹¹⁴ Recognising this, MacDonald follows Maurice’s advice:

it is a duty and a necessity to strike continually at a cancer which is eating out the heart of Christendom, the poisonous quality and deadly effects of which our most vehement Protestant declaimers do not exaggerate but underrate.¹¹¹⁵

That ‘cancer’ inheres in false convictions that ‘outrage the conscience, [...] misrepresent the character of God, [and] generate a fearful amount of insincere belief, positive infidelity, also, I think, of immorality’.¹¹¹⁶ As Lash remarks regarding such fundamentalism: ‘In many respects, the withdrawal of the fideist into his world of private certainties is a greater betrayal of Christian faith than the open-minded uncertainty of the agnostic.’¹¹¹⁷ For Iain McGilchrist, such private certainties are ‘the greatest of all illusions’:

whatever kind of fundamentalism it may underwrite, that of religion or science, it is what the ancients meant by *hubris*. The only certainty, it seems to me, is that those who believe they are certainly right are certainly wrong.¹¹¹⁸

In the words of Pope Francis: ‘Fundamentalism is a disease that is found in all religions. [...]

Religious fundamentalism isn’t religion, it’s idolatry.’¹¹¹⁹

¹¹¹³ ‘To Lady Mount Temple, October 22, 1893’, *Letters GM*, p. 357.

¹¹¹⁴ *Evangelical Disenchantment*, p. 197.

¹¹¹⁵ *Theological Essays*, p. 136.

¹¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹¹¹⁷ *Theology on Dover Beach*, p. 59.

¹¹¹⁸ *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 460.

¹¹¹⁹ Cindy Wooden, ‘Pope Says He Was Surprised by Crowds, Joy in Africa’, <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2015/pope-says-he-was-surprised-by-crowds-joy-in-africa.cfm> [accessed 14 July 2017]. The Vatican has recently expressed the opinion that American fundamentalist Evangelicalism is based on ‘a logic that is no different from the one that inspires Islamic fundamentalism’ (Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa, ‘Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism in the USA: A Surprising Ecumenism’,

Of MacDonald's disdain for propositional certainty and 'theologic' systems, one contemporary critic concluded: 'his quarrel is therefore with all the Evangelical Churches at home and abroad'.¹¹²⁰ However, I believe one might go further and claim he contests the foundations of Western Christianity. In this final section—an excursus into complex theological territory demanding more discussion than can be offered—we explore this claim. As this section perhaps raises more questions than it answers, it should be read as offering pointers to further research, and indicative of the relevance of MacDonald's ideas to current theological debates, particularly relating to the rise in fundamentalism.

We begin by looking more closely at David Kelsey's *Eccentric Existence* (and responses to it) as the child in MacDonald's work necessarily makes anthropological claims about the race of which it is representative. Kelsey's theological anthropology appears to be based broadly on many of the principles that MacDonald rejected.¹¹²¹ If critics such as Catherine Pickstock are right in their dismissal of Kelsey's anthropology as fundamentally flawed, this may shed light on the nature and validity of MacDonald's claims, particularly as in her view Kelsey's project demonstrates 'certain ways in which both "narrative theology" and the Genevan experiments fail the test of matching up to the witness of either the Bible or of Christian doctrinal tradition'.¹¹²² Does MacDonald's theology pass the test?

One central issue is that of univocity—univocal speech about being that implies monism—a pertinent issue in light of MacDonald's apparent espousal of Behmenist, or Plotinian, cosmology. Kelsey's core claim that orthodox Western Christianity needs creation ('all that is not God') to be entirely separate from God is in danger, if univocal speech is used, of implying that God's *esse* is on the same plane as created being, collapsing the essential 'ontological difference'. In this regard, Pickstock notes—countering Kelsey's suggestion that creation considered as a stand-alone project would still have meaning even if shorn of its eschatological telos—

<https://laciviltacattolica.com/june-2017/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism/> [accessed 14 July 2017]).

¹¹²⁰ *The Religion of Our Literature*, p. 305.

¹¹²¹ Kelsey, for example, stresses that creation has value 'simply in its being just what God creates in all its everydayness'. God's creation does not have a noumenal quality which is more desirable or important than the quotidian 'surface', moreover, it is 'deeply informed by evil' (*EE*, pp. 191–92). Furthermore, the 'quotidian everydayness' of humans and their environment is valued by God (see note 320).

¹¹²² 'The One Story: A Critique of David Kelsey's Theological Robotics', *Modern Theology*, 27 (2011), 26–40 (p. 27).

that the traditional understanding of creation holds ‘that creation was for the sake of human deification and cosmic transfiguration, in such a way that God would finally be “all in all”’. This, as noted, is MacDonald’s emphasis. In her view:

This is at variance with Kelsey’s view that in the act of creation, God by no means “gives himself”, but rather gives the creation to be self-standing. But how can such an espousal of univocity of being by default be acceptable without a thoroughgoing justification? Simply waiving the complex dilemmas which ensue from such a position, such as how there can be something other from the omnipresent God, does not do away with them.¹¹²³

Pickstock is reacting here to Kelsey’s view of creation as a self-standing ‘gracious’ gift while at the same time insisting that it is ‘thoroughly other-than-God’ and may not be considered intrinsically gracious in the same way as God’s presence in creation by the ‘circumambient’ Spirit or the incarnate Son.¹¹²⁴ In other words, creation is a gracious gift, but not intrinsically ‘graceful’. In her view, it implies that creation is not ‘in’ God but somehow ‘alongside’ God, equating to ‘an espousal of univocity’.

This seems a logical conclusion, but is perhaps based on a limited reading. In my view, Kelsey is attempting to reject univocity by insisting on ontological difference while at the same time allowing that God relates graciously to his ‘gift’ (impossible if this gift is not somehow ‘other’). Elsewhere, for example, he insists on ‘the Creator-creature ontological difference between God [...] and all that is not God’, that ‘the triune God is not one more causal factor in the complex of energy systems that make up the creaturely cosmos’, and that ‘God and creatures are by definition not on a common spatio-temporal framework, God and creatures are by definition not on a common ontological level’.¹¹²⁵ Pickstock’s reading seems to stem from Kelsey’s identification of three distinct biblical narratives concerning the way God relates to creation (as either creator, redeemer, or consummator) leading to a fragmented account of reality that, according to Pickstock, misrepresents God by seeming ‘to endorse a (mis)reading of the Cappadocians in terms of a relational play between hypostatic centres somewhat independent in their

¹¹²³ Ibid., p. 29. Kelsey insists that ‘*EE* emphatically does *not* espouse the “univocity of being”’ (‘Response to the Symposium on *Eccentric Existence*’, *Modern Theology*, 27 (2011), 72–86 (p. 78).

¹¹²⁴ *EE*, p. 214.

¹¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 714, 718, 844.

own right'.¹¹²⁶ This disassembling of the biblical narrative has the advantage of providing specific (and often profound) insights into aspects of God's relating to 'all that is not God', but requires a significant feat of imaginative reassembly which, if hasty, can lead to problematic conclusions. One suspects Catherine Pickstock may not have had the time to focus on 'reassembly' and in the process has perhaps confused hypothetical moves used to tease out aspects of how God relates to God's creation with assertions that this is indeed how God acts (perhaps a fault also displayed by such as Samuel Law Wilson in their evaluation of MacDonald).

Kelsey, in his response to Pickstock, identifies sixteen issues he feels she has misunderstood. A key issue is that Pickstock blames the tripartite narrative approach for voicing only one aspect of 'The One Story' as if only one divine hypostasis was acting. However, Kelsey repeatedly insists such sub-narratives must be viewed as simply one perspective on the triune God's actions. For example, the observation that 'God's relating to us as our creator is not [gracious]' (see below) must be understood in the context of God never acting as simply 'creator' on the basis that '[g]iven *perichoresis*, it is not simply the Father who creates, but the triune God'.¹¹²⁷ The problems stem from the discursive tactic of considering each perspective as if the others *might* not apply leading, for example, to the claim that quotidian existence would have meaning in the absence of reconciliation or consummation. Thus in discussing Wisdom literature's unique view of the quotidian, Kelsey notes that '[c]reation-as-a-whole is not understood by reference to a transcendent end or *telos* beyond itself'¹¹²⁸ and that human flourishing is a meaningful concept even if couched in entirely immanentist terms.¹¹²⁹ This is no doubt true from this limited perspective, but Pickstock is essentially arguing that, being limited and necessarily incomplete, it is invalid. And Kelsey seems to concur, for he also, for example, insists that human identity inheres in being 'elected for eschatological consummation'.¹¹³⁰ MacDonald would, I believe, side with Pickstock and argue that it is dangerous to lose sight of the big picture.

¹¹²⁶ 'The One Story', p. 27.

¹¹²⁷ *EE*, p. 121.

¹¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 315–16.

¹¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 527.

The issue of univocity is, nevertheless, worth exploring further as according to Pickstock, John Milbank and Radical Orthodox colleagues, its assumption by Duns Scotus introduced a fault-line into theology which was ‘the greatest of all disruptions carried out in the history of European thought’¹¹³¹—the idea that being can be considered in isolation without distinguishing between divine and created being—leading to the birth of secular philosophy and paving the way for ‘the Genevan experiment’, MacDonald’s primary target. At the heart of the Radical Orthodox perspective are claims, echoing MacDonald’s, that there is no ‘territory independent of God’, that it represents an alternative to the standard Christian polarities of conservatism and liberalism, and that radical truth may be found in medieval theology.¹¹³² Furthermore, it is fundamentally suspicious of a ‘Barthianism [that] can tend to the ploddingly exegetical’ (MacDonald’s ‘plodding brother’ of imagination, perhaps), and, as MacDonald did, rejects the ‘bastard dualisms of faith and reason, grace and nature’.¹¹³³ These issues inform Pickstock’s rejection of Kelsey’s project. Her particular concern is that while Kelsey states that ‘God’s creating is truly gracious’, he qualifies this by insisting that ‘God’s active relating to us as our eschatological consummator and [...] as our reconciler is grace properly speaking; God’s relating to us as our creator is not’.¹¹³⁴ Nature, in other words, is not inherently gracious—an example of a ‘bastard dualism’.¹¹³⁵

These issues of linguistics and semantics have a direct bearing on ontology and, in turn, implications for theological accounts of evil, God’s response to evil, and God’s moral nature. For if creation is entirely other than God, God is within God’s rights (as it were) to act as did Pilate: to wash his hands, turn his back, and say ‘this is nothing to do with me’. According to Milbank, such handwashing equates to a ‘basely sensual relation to reality’ or ‘a purely rational relation to the world’ symptomatic of the Enlightenment turning its back on transcendent

¹¹³¹ *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. by John Milbank, *et al.* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 23. This view has been contested. See for example Thomas Williams, ‘The Doctrine of Univocity is True and Salutory’, *Modern Theology*, 21 (2005), 575–85.

¹¹³² *Radical Orthodoxy*, pp. 3–4.

¹¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹³⁴ *EE*, p. 214.

¹¹³⁵ Kelsey would, I believe, claim that nature *is* gracious, but only when God relates to it as reconciler or consummator. One can sympathise with Pickstock’s view that such an approach appears to imply a triadic rather than a triune God. Kelsey, however, insists that ‘*EE* repeatedly makes the point that it is always and only the Triune God who relates in each of the three ways *EE* distinguishes’ (‘Responses to Symposium on *EE*’, p. 78).

truth.¹¹³⁶ The nub of the issue is that while Western soteriology stresses that God in Christ has *not* ‘washed his hands’, the implication of articulations of damnation that somehow imply that God is unable to intervene salvifically for a subset of God’s creatures implies a realm where God is not sovereign, not present, and unable to act. At root are certain articulations of the doctrines of original sin and *creatio ex nihilo*, the doctrine of hell being the outworking of these foundations.

These issues exercised MacDonald and, in his view, were behind what I called earlier the ‘cataphatic literalist fundamentalism’ of his day that had prised God away from God’s creation and installed an idol. Focusing on Newton as exemplary of this move, John Milbank summarises the issue:

Newton no longer conceived of God as Being as such, and as the source of finite being produced from nothing but sharing by various degrees in his infinite simple *esse*. His God was rather a supremely powerful entity who had shaped alongside himself other entities with whom he communicated [...].¹¹³⁷

MacDonald counters such views by insisting that we are not forged by God in, and from, some universal ground of being—but from God’s created ‘*nihil*’. The spatio-temporal stage of the drama, MacDonald insists, emerges from the heart of God rather than existing ‘alongside’ it. ‘If God were not, there would not even be nothing. Not even nothingness preceded life. Nothingness owes its very idea to existence.’¹¹³⁸ Creation exists in some sense ‘in’ God and is not independent of God: ‘This world is not merely a thing which God hath made, subjecting it to laws; but it is [not was] an expression of the thought, the feeling, the heart of God himself.’¹¹³⁹ Since the essential being of God is love, ‘Love is the one bond of the universe, the heart of God, the life of his children.’¹¹⁴⁰ This focus on the immanence of God and the graciousness of nature leads MacDonald to insist that God cannot ‘wash his hands’ in regard to certain of his creatures, for all are God’s children:

¹¹³⁶ *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 25.

¹¹³⁷ ‘Life, or Gift and Glissando’, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, 1 (2012), 121–51 (p. 121).

¹¹³⁸ *US2*, p. 144.

¹¹³⁹ *Orts*, p. 246.

¹¹⁴⁰ *HG*, p. 212.

[God] is bound in himself to make up for wrong done by his children, and he can do nothing to make up for wrong done but by bringing about the repentance of the wrong-doer.¹¹⁴¹

For this reason, MacDonald must conclude that the *mysterium iniquitatis* is ‘in’ God, and that God will eventually act such that God will be ‘all in all’. It leads to the universalist perspective recently articulated in Rob Bell’s short popular apologetic, *Love Wins* (resulting also in significant backlash from the Evangelical community).¹¹⁴² MacDonald likewise insists:

For nothing less than this did Christ die. [...] He brings and is bringing God and man, and man and man, into perfect unity: ‘I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfect in one.’¹¹⁴³

We need, however, to realise that MacDonald’s Neoplatonic or Behmenist model of God radiating being into lower orders of existence is metaphorical rather than ontological. It may have ontological, that is ‘scientific’ in MacDonald’s language, implications, but it is primarily a metaphor for God’s moral relationship with humanity. As noted, MacDonald refuses to speculate on the ontic nature of the human proximate context.¹¹⁴⁴

That said, I am nevertheless arguing that fundamental theological claims made by MacDonald resonate with the quest of the Radical Orthodox ‘movement’ to overturn erroneous embedded ideas that have structurally warped Western theology. His critique of Calvinism cannot simply be dismissed as a reaction to contemporary excesses, as David Bentley Hart realises. To explore this and the moral implications of MacDonald’s emanationist model, we read Hart’s paper, ‘God, Creation, and Evil: The Moral Meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*’.

The key issue we have identified is MacDonald’s seeming inability to articulate a convincing account of evil. Hart summarises the dilemma:

God *in se* is not determined by creation and [...], consequently, evil does not enter into our understanding of the divine essence. All of this is true, of course, but left to itself it inexorably devolves

¹¹⁴¹ US3, p. 128.

¹¹⁴² Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (London: Collins, 2011). For Kevin DeYoung, ‘It is the last rung for evangelicals falling off the ladder into liberalism or unbelief’ (‘God Is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School is Still True: A Review of Love Wins’, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/50772118/Love-Wins-Review-by-Kevin-DeYoung> [accessed 21 June 2015]).

¹¹⁴³ US3, pp. 128–29.

¹¹⁴⁴ Note 615.

toward half-truth, and then toward triviality—a wave of the prestidigitator’s hand and Auschwitz magically vanishes.¹¹⁴⁵

MacDonald does tend to wave such a ‘prestidigitator’s hand’. The other side of the coin, Hart notes, is that since the relationship between God and creation is one of contingency, one cannot simply assume that God’s ‘morality’ is alien to the human. MacDonald agrees:

To say on the authority of the Bible that God does a thing no honourable man would do, is to lie against God; to say that it is therefore right, is to lie against the very spirit of God.¹¹⁴⁶

For Hart, the issue is: ‘precisely because God and creation are ontologically distinct in the manner of the absolute and the contingent, they are morally indiscernible’.¹¹⁴⁷ In other words, existential otherness does not imply moral otherness.

In Hart’s view, following Gregory of Nyssa, since *nihil* is itself *ex* the ‘heart of God’ (to use MacDonald’s phrase), *creatio ex nihilo* necessarily implies an eschatological telos—a return to that heart. (One might say that the funereal phrase should be ‘heart to heart’ rather than ‘dust to dust’.) And, agreeing with MacDonald’s view that the whole purpose of creation is that, having been flung into existence by God’s creative ‘sun’ we are destined to return such ‘that his life might be our life, that in us, too, might dwell that same consuming fire which is essential love’,¹¹⁴⁸ Hart writes:

In the end of all things is their beginning, and only from the perspective of the end can one know what they are, why they have been made, and who the God is who has called them forth from nothingness.¹¹⁴⁹

Such a concept only has meaning if God’s creatures are genuinely such, that is, created beings with independent existence without which a return to their source would simply be absorption rather than relationship. For Gregory, therefore, unlike Kelsey’s tripartite scheme which can countenance (but does not necessarily imply) a creation without such a telos, true

¹¹⁴⁵ David Bentley Hart, ‘God, Creation, and Evil: The Moral Meaning of *Creatio Ex Nihilo*’, *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, 3 (2015), 1–17 (p. 2).

¹¹⁴⁶ *US3*, pp. 116–17.

¹¹⁴⁷ ‘God, Creation, and Evil’, p. 2.

¹¹⁴⁸ *US1*, p. 30.

¹¹⁴⁹ ‘God, Creation, and Evil’, p. 2.

creation is only the *result* of consummation (not absorption); anything prior to that is necessarily contingent and, in a sense, provisional.¹¹⁵⁰

MacDonald's cosmology envisages God as the radiating source of all that is. Hart notes that as long as this is not reduced to 'a kind of gross *material* efflux of the divine substance into lesser substances' (Milton's misconception), there is no tension here with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. It still means that 'all that exists comes from one divine source' and, perhaps contra Kelsey, '*subsists* [rather than exists] by the grace of impartation'.¹¹⁵¹ MacDonald expresses this by suggesting we are distinguished from God, but not divided from God: 'that between creator and poet lies the one unpassable gulf which distinguishes—far be it from us to say *divides*—all that is God's from all that is man's'.¹¹⁵² This is not to say that God and creation are ontologically on the same plane, but it is to say that God is intimately involved in 'all that is not God'. One might say that the 'distinguishing' gulf separates ontologically but not experientially. It is, therefore, in MacDonald's words,

teeming with infinite revelations, but a gulf over which no man can pass to find out God, although God needs not to pass over it to find man; the gulf between that which calls, and that which is thus called into being; between that which makes in its own image and that which is made in that image.¹¹⁵³

This involvement by God in creation, a creation which is not in any sense 'needed' by God (as if to somehow complete God's identity)¹¹⁵⁴ but is a gift for which God takes full responsibility, means that in its graciousness and radical dependence on God as its final cause, 'there can be', in Hart's words, 'no residue of the pardonably tragic, no irrecoverable or irreconcilable remainder left at the end of the tale; for, if there were, this too God would have done, as a price freely assumed in creating'.¹¹⁵⁵ This is why MacDonald insists that '[a]nnihilation itself is no death to evil. Only good where evil was, is evil dead. An evil thing must live with its

¹¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 4 (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁵² *Orts*, p. 2.

¹¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 2–3.

¹¹⁵⁴ *Beauty of the Infinite*, pp. 156, 158; cf. *EE*, p. 123.

¹¹⁵⁵ 'God, Creation, and Evil', p. 5.

evil until it chooses to be good. That alone is the slaying of evil.’¹¹⁵⁶ The conclusion, then, is not that God is responsible for, or condones, evil—with the implication that ‘every evil that time comprises [...] is an arraignment of God’s goodness’—but that God is ‘responsible’ for its resolution, a solution that will only be fully visible in the eschaton. Hart again: ‘until the end of all things, no answer has been given’.¹¹⁵⁷ Thus Hart rejects the morality of an Augustinian hell, MacDonald’s ‘hell of exhausted mercy’:

When Augustine lamented the soft-heartedness that made Origen believe that demons, heathens, and (most preposterously of all) unbaptized babies might ultimately be spared the torments of eternal fire, he made clear how the moral imagination must bend and twist in order to absorb such beliefs.¹¹⁵⁸

Instead, he too insists that ‘the greater hope’ is the only reasonable position to take:

Even Paul asks, in the tortured, conditional voice of Romans 9, whether there might be vessels of wrath stored up solely for destruction only because he trusts that there are not, that instead all are bound in disobedience only so that God might prove himself just by showing mercy on all.¹¹⁵⁹

The key issue, to which both Hart and MacDonald object, is that Western Christianity in particular has evolved an erroneous theology, of which the doctrine of hell is the prime *reductio ad absurdum*, leading to evangelical zeal effectively motivated by the need to save people *from* God. Singling out Calvin for particular criticism, Hart observes that:

Calvin had the courage to acknowledge that his account of divine sovereignty necessitates belief in the predestination not only of the saved and the damned, but of the fall itself; and he recognized that the biblical claim that “God is love” must, on his principles, be accounted a definition not of God in himself, but only of God as experienced by the elect (toward the damned, God is in fact hate).¹¹⁶⁰

Hart seems to summarise MacDonald’s inability to accept such a schizophrenic characterisation of God when he describes Calvinism as ‘an immensely influential but deeply defective theological tradition’¹¹⁶¹ whose infernal toxicity has infected ‘just about the whole Christian

¹¹⁵⁶ *Lilith*, p. 212.

¹¹⁵⁷ ‘God, Creation, and Evil’, p. 5.

¹¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

¹¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

¹¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8; cf. MacDonald makes a similar claim (note 685).

¹¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

tradition'.¹¹⁶² The issue of univocity underlies this 'toxicity' in that it is assumed that the mystery of faith may be logically investigated on the same terms as the created realm. This is not to say that rationality is suspect, simply that when grace and nature are divorced, human logic is inexorably drawn towards absurdity. It results in 'thin' and insubstantial schemes that hide the true nature of God's gracious creation and God's relationship to it. For Hart, the many individual texts that speak of universal salvation, along with the wider panoply of the biblical story as a whole, point to a consummation inhering in Christ being 'all in all'.¹¹⁶³ Anything less than this, he argues, morally compromises God. 'It is odd', he remarks concerning passages that imply universal salvation, 'that for at least fifteen centuries such passages have been all but lost behind so thin a veil as can be woven from those three deeply ambiguous verses that seem (and only seem) to threaten eternal torments for the wicked'.¹¹⁶⁴ Hart's 'thin veil' is reminiscent of MacDonald's 'robe of imputed righteousness' made from 'legal cobwebs spun by spiritual spiders' manufactured by the Reformers.¹¹⁶⁵ MacDonald's work represents an attempt to draw back this curtain and rediscover ancient Christian orthodoxy.

Perennially suspicious of such 'logical' schemes that hide the truth of Christ, MacDonald focuses on the eschaton as providing resolution to the enigma of life at the expense of a robust theological account of *social* evil. Instead he focuses on *religious* evil. This is simply because he sees religious evil as the fundamental cause of all social evil. This is well articulated by Kelsey who suggests that for every worshipful response to the three fundamental ways that God relates to God's creation—as creator, redeemer, and consummator—there are distorted responses; that the distortion of the appropriate doxological responses of faith, love, and hope is the essence of sin, and that such responses inevitably further distort the context in which humans live. This is the root of social evil. So while there is a tendency in MacDonald to wave his 'pres-tidigitator's hand so that Auschwitz magically vanishes', this is because he firmly believes that God will ultimately resolve the issue of evil and be 'all in all'. He can only see resolution in an

¹¹⁶² Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹⁶³ For a wide biblical perspective, see Gerald O'Collins, *Salvation for All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹⁶⁴ 'God, Creation, and Evil', p. 15. The texts referred to (at the head of the paper) are Rom. 5.18–19, 11.32; 1 Cor. 3.15, 15.22, 15.28; 1 Tim. 2.3–4, 4.10.

¹¹⁶⁵ *US2*, p. 103.

eschatological future. In a world where social evil was seen as almost inevitable, and where there was still a lingering view that God had ordained the social order, he prefers not to dwell on evil but instead address what he sees as its root cause. It is not an erroneous doctrine of evil *per se*, rather it is the consequence of a limited perspective of the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ of the kingdom of God—a failure to appreciate that present reality is not simply a ‘school time’ to prepare humanity for the eschaton, but that the kingdom of God is already proleptically present in the present age. This latter (more Maurician) perspective might have given MacDonald a more pragmatic view of the need to engage actively in the fight against social ills, a perspective that is clearly only in the background in his work. Instead, he brings before us idealised saints and critical fairy children to stir those who claim faith towards living more faithfully.

Hart closes his paper by contrasting the vision of Gregory—of all souls being drawn towards the joyous source of their being—with that of Augustine’s eschatological vision of two cities, in the most populous of which are quarantined those who are under God’s judgement and destined for perpetual sorrow. He concludes:

There is no question to my mind which of them saw the story more clearly. Or which theologians are the best guides to scripture as a whole: Gregory, Origen, Evagrius, Diodore, Theodore, Isaac of Ninevah [*sic*] ... George MacDonald.¹¹⁶⁶

9.5 ‘The idea of the universe’

The child, while primarily expressive of humanity’s ‘vertical’ relationship with God, also underlines the connectedness of humanity under the headship of Christ—that, in carrying the *imago Dei*, the child is related to siblings. Although there are numerous historical and scholarly views of what it means to be a child and carry the *imago Dei*,¹¹⁶⁷ it is certainly contrary to Calvin’s view that ‘he who perverted the whole order of nature in heaven and earth [Adam] deteriorated his race by his revolt’ with the result that ‘the heavenly image in man was effaced’,¹¹⁶⁸ and

¹¹⁶⁶ ‘God, Creation, and Evil’, pp. 15–16.

¹¹⁶⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 186–200.

¹¹⁶⁸ *Institutes*, II. 1. 5.

that ‘the impurity of parents is transmitted to their children, so that all, without exception, are originally depraved’.¹¹⁶⁹

For Calvin, humanity is connected by depravity; for MacDonald, the connection is love. For example, the child leads MacDonald to intuitively question the morality of eternal judgment. Although he concurs with the many nineteenth century voices rejecting a Dantean hell, his Job-like criticism of God is more subtle for, as noted above, he is rather questioning the nature of a God who is content to be ‘defeated’ by evil such that good creatures that God has given life to are eternally punished, or perhaps summarily destroyed, despite the fact Christ submitted to evil in order to emasculate it on their behalf.¹¹⁷⁰

However, there is another aspect of the theology of final judgment to which the child speaks. Recent scholarship concerning human personhood highlights that while individuality is a meaningful concept, it cannot be divorced from community—that an ‘individual’ is not just forged in the crucible of social interaction but is in some measure constituted by it. It reflects Maurice’s assertion that God sees people as connected through participation in the kingdom of God, rather than ‘partially, or each in reference to a separate centre, as they naturally do’.¹¹⁷¹ Grenz, for example, quoting John Zizioulas, writes:

“Communion does not threaten personal particularity; it is constitutive of it.” Such communion establishes the uniqueness of each person, in that the person is an indispensable and irreplaceable part of a relational existence.¹¹⁷²

Grenz suggests that the monadic independent self typical of both medieval and enlightenment thinking is untenable; rather, that ‘communion’ has the implication that ‘[a] self does not amount to much, no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations’,¹¹⁷³ and that ‘the postmodern self is constituted by social relationships’.¹¹⁷⁴ David Kelsey concurs, reminding us not to forget that the ‘vertical’ relationship with God is also a dimension of human ‘social’ em-

¹¹⁶⁹ Ibid., II. 1. 6.

¹¹⁷⁰ Col. 2.15. MacDonald does not seem to discuss conditional immortality (that is, the final annihilation of the wicked) as articulated, for example, by Wenham (*Facing Hell*, pp. 229–57). His views chime more with such as Moltmann who regards both hell and annihilation as equally morally suspect (Jürgen Moltmann, ‘The Logic of Hell’, in *God Will Be All in All*, ed. by Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 43–47).

¹¹⁷¹ F. D. Maurice and the *Crisis of Christian Authority*, p. 154 (see page 17).

¹¹⁷² *The Social God and the Relational Self*, p. 52.

¹¹⁷³ From Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, in *ibid.*, p. 135.

¹¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 136, 331.

beddedness: ‘the proximate contexts into which we are born make us social beings all the way down, and all the way up to our responding to God as well’.¹¹⁷⁵

So not only are there moral questions concerning eternal retribution for finite sin, there is the issue that if some of God’s creatures are to be destroyed this necessarily implies that some of the relational-structural content of the personhood of the eschatologically blessed will be lost. To put it crudely: can John Piper truly enjoy heaven as ‘himself’ knowing that his sons are eternally suffering?¹¹⁷⁶ David Bentley Hart summarises thus:

After all, what is a person other than a whole history of associations, loves, memories, attachments, and affinities? Who are we, other than all the others who have made us who we are, and to whom we belong as much as they to us? We are those others. To say that the sufferings of the damned will either be clouded from the eyes of the blessed or, worse, increase the pitiless bliss of heaven¹¹⁷⁷ is also to say that no persons can possibly be saved: for, if the memories of others are removed, or lost, or one’s knowledge of their misery is converted into indifference or, God forbid, into greater beatitude, what then remains of one in one’s last bliss? Some other being altogether, surely: a spiritual anonymity, a vapid spark of pure intellection, the residue of a soul reduced to no one. But not a person—not the person who was. But the deepest problem is not the logic of such claims; it is their sheer moral hideousness.¹¹⁷⁸

In response, however, it could be argued that ‘moral hideousness’ would equally result if God allowed, say, an abusive individual responsible for damaging others during earthly life to continue to abuse eternally, or if the distortions resulting from that influence were not beatified.¹¹⁷⁹ Evil, as MacDonald argues, must be destroyed and sin atoned for—a strong element of his purgatorial emphasis. Hart’s words, though, do reveal the bankruptcy of simplistic and voluntarist notions of election such as Piper’s.

In contrast, MacDonald’s universalism allows him to look forward to a resurrection body not only perfectly expressive of the individual, but cognisant of the many others to whom it owes its existence.¹¹⁸⁰ He views eschatological resolution as more than simply blessing for the

¹¹⁷⁵ *EE*, p. 274.

¹¹⁷⁶ Page 126.

¹¹⁷⁷ Hart notes that this was the view of Tertullian, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas and Luther.

¹¹⁷⁸ ‘God, Creation, and Evil’, p. 9.

¹¹⁷⁹ I am thinking here of ‘the Lamb as though slain’ (Rev. 5.6) or the post-resurrection stigmata of Christ, the eternal evidence of evil defeated.

¹¹⁸⁰ *USI*, pp. 242–44.

elect surrounded by ambiguity; with Paul, he looks for the redemption of the whole of creation.¹¹⁸¹ Anything less than this, he maintains, amounts to defeat for God.

These anthropological implications directly inform MacDonald's doctrine of God. The divine image carried by the human child relates to childlikeness as a category. God, too, is 'a child':

It is *like king like subject* in the kingdom of heaven. No rule of force, as of one kind over another kind. It is the rule of *kind*, of *nature*, of deepest nature—of *God*.¹¹⁸²

Judith Plotz, with, I believe, some justification, locates the Romantic child as stranded between earth and heaven; neither connected with transcendence nor with the (sometimes grim) realities of earth. Wordsworth's child may attempt to connect with God—and MacDonald may laud Wordsworth as the 'high priest of nature' who 'in all things felt the presence of the Divine Spirit',¹¹⁸³—but, in many respects, Wordsworth's Nature, with whom 'The Child' communes, is a surrogate deity somewhat divorced from Christ. As MacDonald himself notes, the 'inclined plane from [...] nature to [...] the Son of Man' is 'what we miss in Wordsworth'.¹¹⁸⁴ Plotz, although perhaps overstating the case, notes that in this godless Romantic mid-realm the child itself assumes the role of God.¹¹⁸⁵

The Christian child, however—especially the Calvinist child—was, ironically, moved earthwards: the image of God having been effaced, it, like its secular counterparts burdened with evolutionary baggage, was in some sense less than human; a human in the making, perhaps, but deeply flawed. Notably, and again ironically (noting the lack of childhood sexual

¹¹⁸¹ Rom. 8.22.

¹¹⁸² *USI*, p. 14; cf. pages 208, 243.

¹¹⁸³ *Orts*, p. 247.

¹¹⁸⁴ *England's Antiphon*, p. 307. Elsewhere MacDonald notes: 'He saw God present everywhere; not always immediately, in his own form, it is true' (*Orts*, p. 247).

¹¹⁸⁵ Page 36.

awareness), it was considered to over-indulge in ‘passion’, deeply feared as, since Augustine, sexual awareness had been equated with the Fall.¹¹⁸⁶

Against this backdrop, MacDonald places a child whose perfect model is Christ which, despite shortcomings in its dramatization, connects both earth and heaven. Despite Plotz’s protestations, perhaps the Romantic child was the most positive incarnation of childhood of the period. MacDonald certainly thought so, and his child bears the marks of Romanticism; however, one must not lose sight of how MacDonald’s child—rather than floating in the mid-realm—genuinely bridges, or attempts to bridge, earth and heaven. The hesitancy is on the earthward side: wanting to reconnect the child with transcendence, in his idealist enthusiasm he has perhaps over-disconnected it, even uprooted it, from the earth; his fictional children *do* tend to float implausibly above nineteenth century grime; the social dimension of human life *is* lacking.

However, our reading of MacDonald has revealed a nuanced challenge to contemporary theology, many aspects of which have continuing application, especially addressing the issue of Christian (or other religious or secular) fundamentalism. In an era broadly suspicious, or fearful, of childhood, MacDonald’s choice to make God a child, meaning that humans carrying the *imago* are thus also children, was a radical challenge to the orthodoxy of the day. That MacDonald’s child has Romantic flaws must be admitted, the most notable being its aversion to facing the true horror of evil, however, this should not distract from the radical nature of the claims being made. MacDonald’s theological embrace of the child has redeemed the child, that is, the child, instead of being viewed as less than human has been reinstated as *essentially* human: the tables are turned. The child questions whether ‘adulthood’, with its self-centredness, affectations, power-hunger, and conventional beliefs, is a valid expression of humanity. The child claims that it is the pretentious adult that is the sinner. It claims to see truly, imaginatively; it is the Pharisaical adult who is blind.

Looking heavenwards, the false Romantic deity, ‘The Child’, as well as the Calvinist headmaster, are exposed as idols. However much one might want to soften this and argue that

¹¹⁸⁶ *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. by Philip Levine (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1966), chs 15, 18–20. Calvin insists that no human ‘has not felt the power of concupiscence’ and generally blames this on Adam (*Institutes*, II. 7. 5).

MacDonald is simply attacking what in his view is a distortion of Calvinism—simply misguided ‘popular religion’—will not wash. As I have argued above, I believe there is a strong case that MacDonald’s child fundamentally quarrels with ‘all the churches at home and abroad’, that is, not simply Calvinism or Evangelicalism and their offshoots: his theology is corrosive to many ideas considered foundational, especially in Western Christianity.

At the heart of this is a rejection of the power narratives embedded in faith which suggest that God, instead of being the world’s advocate, has become its ‘infinite contrary’¹¹⁸⁷ and that, in consequence, the world has to be ‘overcome’. MacDonald’s ontology and cosmology may, in many respects, be flawed or naive, but one cannot escape that his valuing of ‘nature’—the quotidian world in which humans live, however idealised—has reinstated creation as a place wholly ‘in’ God and infused by God. Neither can one deny that, despite flaws in his account of evil, his emphasis that Christ will be all in all represents a challenge to the tacit assumption in Western theology that Christ will *not* be all in all; that there will be a residue of God’s creation impervious to God’s inexorable love.

These priorities are summed up in MacDonald’s claim that ‘[t]he child-relation is the one eternal, ever enduring, never changing relation’ that is ‘the idea of the universe’.¹¹⁸⁸ An ‘idea’ which, since rooted in the ‘abyss of love’, means that the pursuit of aesthetic truth—that is, God—is an open-ended, eternal vocation. In Hart’s words, it is ‘perpetually to transcend any fixed identity: a transcendence which is always more transcendent, an infinite scope within the self that no self can comprise, and to which the self belongs. The *imago Dei*’, that is, being a child, ‘is not simply a possession of the soul as much as a future, a hope’.¹¹⁸⁹ MacDonald phrases it thus:

Nobody knows to what the relation of father and son may yet come. Those who accept the Christian revelation are bound to recognize in it depths infinite. For is it not a reproduction in small of the loftiest mystery in the human ken—that of the infinite Father and the infinite Son?¹¹⁹⁰

¹¹⁸⁷ *Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 134.

¹¹⁸⁸ *HG*, p. 161 (pages 123, 243).

¹¹⁸⁹ *Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 114.

¹¹⁹⁰ *Castle Warlock*, p. 170.

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